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From Peers to Policy: How Broader Social Contexts Influence the Adaptation of Children and Youth in Immigrant Families

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Abstract

This chapter provides an overview of nonfamily contexts that shape the development and adjustment of children and youth from immigrant families. It also describes the four chapters in this special issue that focus on peer, network, legal, and institutional contexts that influence the lives of immigrant parents and their children. Directions for future research on the social contexts of development in immigrant families are discussed. © 2008 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

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Immigration in the United States has become a central focus of policy and public concern in the first decade of the 21st century. Conundrums and questions with deep roots in U.S. history—such as the balance between inclusion and exclusion, state and federal responsibility, and whether certain groups are net benefits or drains on society—are being rehashed with regard to immigrant groups (Ellwood, 1988; Massey, 2003; S.1348, 2007). Lost in this debate for the most part is the question of how immigrant children and youth are faring. Although children of immigrant parents of some ethnic groups are doing quite well relative to their U.S.-born counterparts, some are not (Glick & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007; Kao, 1999; Schwartz & Stiefel, 2006; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008). Research has provided some insight into the processes that explain such variation (Duran & Weffer, 1992; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). However, such research has focused almost exclusively on family contexts, demographic and human capital characteristics, and school contexts. Portes and Rumbaut's influential segmented assimilation theory points towards characteristics of host communities, governments, and communities as influences on patterns such as downward and upward assimilation. However, the majority of studies explaining these patterns focus on the family and school as influences on developmental trajectories of children and youth in immigrant families. Few researchers have examined other contexts, such as peers, adult social networks, legal status, and institutions in relationship to developmental outcomes. These contexts have been posited as important in segmented assimilation and other theories of immigrant adaptation, but rarely instantiated in developmental research.

This special issue presents research studies that focus on the influence of peers, extended family networks, and legal and policy contexts on immigrant parents and their children. The studies focus on particular immigrant groups, including those from China, Mexico, the Dominican Republic, and elsewhere. Very different patterns are found across these immigrant groups, underscoring the importance of distinguishing among groups within panethnic categories such as Latinos. The studies in this special issue also use a variety of methodologies including qualitative (in-depth case studies, semistructured interviews, ethnography) and quantitative methods (surveys analyzed using a variety of multivariate methods). Research on immigrant families can benefit greatly from mixing quantitative and qualitative methods (see Yoshikawa, Weisner, Kalil, & Way, 2008). Finally, the studies in this volume are conducted by scholars from psychology, public policy, and sociology. Thus, the exploration of immigrant parents and children is not limited by the methodological or conceptual constraints of any one discipline.

The Contexts of Development

The family is clearly a dominant socializing context for children in immigrant families. Families are the locus for decisions concerning whether to

migrate, the primary source of support for navigating transitions, and the site for transmission of culturally based beliefs and practices to the children. Family factors, such as levels of parental education, language use, parenting practices, family structure, and parent involvement in school, help explain differences by generation of immigration and across immigrant groups in children's academic and cognitive outcomes (Fuligni, Tseng, & Lam, 1999; Han, 2006; Kao & Tienda, 1993; Nord & Griffin, 1999; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). In addition, recent research has documented culturally specific socialization practices that appear to predict academic and socioemotional outcomes for particular immigrant groups (Caplan, Choy, & Whitmore, 1991; Chao, 2001; Conchas, 2001; Waters, 2001). However, family structures and processes do not fully explain differences in educational or social outcomes across generations or immigrant groups, or variation within groups, suggesting that other contextual influences are important as well.

Peer contexts as well as adult social networks are also likely to be important for immigrant children and youth. Such youth frequently spend as much time, if not more, with their peers and with extended family members and other adults. Thus, these contexts may influence immigrant youth as much as the immediate context of families. Other critical contexts for immigrant children and youth include more distal contexts (termed "macrosystems"; see Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) such as legal, institutional, and policy contexts. These types of contexts, which are further removed from the daily lives of youth than the more proximal contexts of peers and adult social networks, offer numerous opportunities and impose various constraints in the lives of immigrant children and youth. They may influence children and youth through intervening changes in peer, school, neighborhood, and family settings (Yoshikawa & Hsueh, 2001). Thus, they too are likely to have a significant influence on immigrant children and youth. This special issue explores the ways in which both proximal and distal contexts influence the lives of immigrant parents and their children's cognitive and socioemotional development.

Proximal Contexts. Among the sets of contexts that are most immediate to the child are the peer and the extended family contexts. Peers greatly shape the social, emotional, and cognitive development of all children (Bukowski & Mesa, 2007) and may be particularly important in the case of immigrant children because it is often the reception of peers that determine the extent to which such children thrive. The extended family in the host and home countries, likewise, often serve as a critical support network for immigrant youth and likely influence the levels of adjustment of such youth. Yet very few researchers have examined such contexts among immigrant families. The existing research on peers has focused predominantly on nonimmigrant, White youth (Way, Gingold, Rotenberg, & Kuriakose, 2005), whereas the existing research on extended families has focused predominantly on nonimmigrant African American families. Two studies in this special issue focus on these critical contexts for immigrant

parents and their children. Qin, Way, and Rana (pp. 27–42) use longitudinal data from two qualitative studies of Chinese immigrant families, to investigate the peer context. They focus on the reasons for the high levels of peer discrimination that are often experienced by Chinese immigrant youth (Qin, Way, & Mukherjee, 2008; Rosenbloom & Way, 2004). Their data reveal that various factors including beliefs about academic ability, immigrant status, language barriers, and physical appearance contribute to the high levels of ethnic/racial discrimination by nonimmigrant peers reported by Chinese immigrant youth. Such negative peer experiences pose a serious impediment to the ability of Chinese immigrant youth to thrive in the social and emotional domains. Their work draws attention to the importance of the peer context for the adjustment of immigrant youth.

In addition to the peer context, the extended family network is also important as it typically reinforces the beliefs and practices valued by the parents at home. Examining how this extended family network provides information, assistance, protection, advice, and support is critical for a more comprehensive understanding of the influence of these networks on the adjustment of immigrant youth. Using a sample of low-income Chinese immigrant families, Jin Li and her colleagues (pp. 9–25) investigate how families build social networks and how these networks function to support immigrant Chinese children's learning. Their findings suggest that families use a range of techniques (e.g., role models, siblings as comparisons) to help support their children's learning. For example, the authors find that families often identify an "anchor helper," a person sufficiently familiar with American schools, to guide the child's school learning by providing tutoring and academic advice. This study underscores the creative strategies families are using to support the academic adjustment of their children. It also extends theories of family processes in immigrant life beyond the typical notions of extended family size and social capital, to the specific functions that extended family members play in the socialization of children.

The research on proximal contexts in this issue underscores the importance of examining the role of nonfamily relationships as well as the extended family in the development of children in immigrant families. The studies reveal the ways in which both peers and adult social networks play an important role in the daily lives of children and adolescents from immigrant families and can be both supportive and challenging to their adaptation process. They extend hypotheses about the role of social networks and social capital in the literature on immigrant adaptation to pinpoint the specific ways in which networks influence youth learning and psychological well-being.

Distal Contexts. Broader social contexts, such as legal, institutional, and policy contexts, have also only begun to be studied relative to child and adolescent development. Although many studies have examined social class (indicators of socioeconomic status, such as parental education, income, and employment) as a source of variation in the trajectories of immigrant children and youth, few have examined the legal, institutional, or policy factors

that may influence both family socioeconomic status and other family processes. The many studies that do exist on legal, institutional, and policy contexts related to immigration rarely incorporate data on parents or children (Borjas, 2001; Massey, 2003).

Two studies in this issue—Kalil and Chen's chapter and Yoshikawa, Godfrey, and Rivera's chapter—address the consequences of undocumented status for family life and child development. These studies find that undocumented parents (particularly Latina) experience higher levels of hardship and social exclusion. The study by Kalil and Chen examines whether legal status in immigrant families is related to food insecurity (the inability to buy the food one would want for one's family). The authors, utilizing one of the only large-scale longitudinal data sets in the country that ask parents about their citizenship status, find that parents who are both foreign-born and without legal status report higher food insecurity, in analyses controlling for a wide range of socioeconomic factors. In contrast, having a parent that is foreign-born with legal status is related to lower food insecurity, even when compared to children of native-born parents. In addition, they find that certain correlates of undocumented status—being Latino, having a larger household size, and lower levels of maternal education—partially explain the difference between citizen and noncitizen levels of food insecurity. These data suggest that children growing up in families with undocumented parents may be at nutritional risk, especially given the fact that these families are not eligible for the federal Food Stamp program. As one of the first studies to link legal to nutritional status among immigrant children, this study contributes to theory and evidence concerning citizenship status and children's health.

In their chapter, Yoshikawa, Godfrey, and Rivera utilize data from a longitudinal birth cohort study of infants born to immigrant Mexican and Dominican mothers, as well as to U.S.-born African American mothers. Data from other studies of New York City suggest that low-income parents from Mexico include a higher proportion of undocumented individuals than their counterparts from the Dominican Republic (Smith, 2006). The authors investigate access to financial services and drivers' licenses as aspects of undocumented parents' social exclusion that may have consequences for family life and child development. The authors find the lowest levels of household-level access to these resources among the group that in New York City is most likely to be undocumented: Mexican mothers. Lack of access to these resources was found to be associated with economic hardship and psychological distress, and those factors, in turn, predicted lower levels of cognitive ability on a standardized assessment at 24 months of age.

Together these studies move beyond traditional indicators of socioeconomic disadvantage to pinpoint the specific risk to family life and children's development that undocumented status may represent. Most studies of disadvantage focus on a very small set of parental economic indicators (income, education, earnings, and occupational status). The current studies show that legal status may be an understudied but important additional

indicator of disadvantage with consequences for children, even in the first 2 years of life. They also suggest the particular risk to family life and child development that Latino families with undocumented status may face. (However, neither study had a large proportion of undocumented parents from other regions of the world, such as Asia or Eastern Europe. Future research should provide more knowledge about the risks that undocumented parents and their children from such regions face.)

These studies strengthen theories of the development of immigrant children and youth by linking what occurs in the home to factors that are directly affected by public policy. Policies of inclusion and exclusion, which define who has access to the benefits of citizenship status, can influence children's development through proximal family processes, such as the ability to provide the food one would like for one's family; experiences of economic hardship; and parental psychological symptoms of depression and anxiety (Fuligni & Yoshikawa, 2004). The family thus continues to be a central context of development, but family processes appear to be influenced by more macro processes through the potent "marker" of legal status. Such information about the developmental consequences of social exclusion or inclusion can inform current policy debates, such as those concerning forms of identification for undocumented immigrants.

This issue concludes with an integrative chapter summarizing future directions for a contextually rich, interdisciplinary field of study for children and youth in immigrant families. This chapter, by Carola Suarez-Orozco and Avary Carhill, eloquently addresses several challenges facing the field. First, they point out the different "blinders" that particular disciplines have in their view of the adaptation of immigrant youth. For example, psychologists, who have come late to the study of immigration, have tended to ignore many aspects of sending and receiving contexts in favor of specifying family processes that predict adaptation. Second, they point out that many contexts remain to be studied in a way that links specifically to developmental trajectories. These include not only the relational, legal, and institutional contexts considered in this issue, but also neighborhood contexts.

In summary, the work presented in this issue provides examples of where we think the study of immigrant families is headed in coming years. By embedding the commonly studied context of families within other social contexts—whether those of proximal settings, such as peers, or those that shape such settings, such as legal or institutional contexts—all of the contributing authors aim to broaden our knowledge of the influences that shape the lives and trajectories of children in immigrant families.

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