

This introductory chapter uses a detailed case study to illustrate the interconnection of multiple social influences on one particular youth's path of migration. It further identifies some of the major influences on immigrant youth development, including the stresses of migration, separations and reunifications, changing networks of relations, poverty and segregation, and identity formation.

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The social worlds of immigrant youth

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DARIO is an adolescent of short stature with curly dark hair.¹ Always well groomed, he has big dark eyes, a chipped tooth, and a scar that dominates his face. He speaks in a raspy, monotone voice, rarely making eye contact. His manner is one of defiance and street savvy well beyond his years.

Dario arrived in the western United States from Central America at the age of ten. In a sad tale, relentlessly repeated, through the next few years he was fated to relive the trauma of the initial separation over and over again. He was first separated from his father when his parents divorced, followed by separation from his mother when she immigrated. Eight years later he left behind his beloved caretaking aunt to join his mother in the United States. This series of departures created ongoing confusion about loved ones and why they always disappear.

Both Dario and his mother speak about the hardships surrounding their separation and reunification. Attempts to reunite were unsuccessful for many years because of documentation issues. Dario recalls that when his visa was denied his mother was so upset she had to be taken to the hospital. It took eight years of efforts before he was able to join her, and during that time he saw his mother only twice. Undeniably, the separations were painful, but so were the reunifications. Dario's mother recalls that in the beginning there were times when Dario would call her at work, crying from fear and loneliness, requiring that she leave work early to be with him.

There is little stability in Dario's current living situation. When Dario arrived in the United States, his mother was in a relationship with a man he did not know. Dario formed a bond with his stepfather that lasted only a short while because his stepfather moved in and out of the home, before leaving permanently—another loss for Dario. In the meantime, two new siblings were born and a grandmother came to live with them, as well as a daughter of Dario's biological father. Despite the family's poverty, Dario's mother is raising four children.

The dynamic and unpredictable household membership, however, is somewhat mitigated by the family's network of social relations. As in many Latino homes, extended family, friends, and church-based relationships help the family in emotional and tangible ways. Dario and his mother define success in relational terms—as providing for immediate and extended family, as “giving back” for their efforts and sacrifices. The gauge of success is whether one has been able to be true to these principles of morality, responsibility to others, goodness, honesty, and authenticity.

Dario's vulnerability is further undermined by his neighborhood, where he is exposed to weapons, drugs, fights, and palpable tensions between ethnic groups. His attitude toward “the street” is ambivalence—he is both critical of and fascinated by it. While he acknowledges that the neighborhood is perceived as unsafe, he claims that he feels secure there. His mother worries that Dario “loves the street” and checks him for drug and alcohol possession when he

comes home. She is concerned that she doesn't know his friends and their parents. Though there is no reason to think that Dario is involved with drugs or gangs, he is certainly at risk. It is "the street" that provides a space for him to construct an identity of competence, leadership, masculinity, and empowerment through his skill in sports—contrasting markedly with his experience in school.

Dario presents contrasting identities—one in the context of the classroom, where he is shy, obedient, and minimally engaged, and another in the street, where he livens up and appears in control. There is a striking disparity between his psychological vulnerability, sadness, and extreme shyness in the school context and the bravado he projects on the street.

This schism can be traced to his educational trajectory. Upon arrival in the United States, Dario was directed to a bilingual program. He was mainstreamed to a regular classroom two years later—a premature transition that reactivated unresolved previous losses. Leaving the "holding place" of the bilingual program is a difficult, disorienting, and anxiety-provoking transition for many immigrant children. For Dario this transition was complicated by the combination of his sadness from multiple losses that he carries with him and his still-limited English skills. His grades have plummeted and his engagement in school has suffered. The school pays no notice and the downward spiral continues. Dario's definition of academic achievement is behavioral and he holds true to that definition—his attendance is good, he is strict about handing in his homework, his teachers praise his behavior in the classroom. Nevertheless, they note that he often does not understand the material. Dario demonstrates how behavioral engagement in school is not enough. His efforts end in frustration; because of his limited language and unavailable academic supports, they do not lead to outcomes that are gratifying and do not encourage further academic efforts. Nevertheless, Dario is positive about school because he feels emotionally supported by relations with adults and peers. This has been particularly true in high school, where he has created a strong connection with one counselor—a relationship that is probably critical in keeping him in school. Unfortunately, his

positive attitude has diminished over time, though it has never turned adversarial.

In terms of his ethnic identity, to borrow from poet Walt Whitman, Dario “contains multitudes.”² When we first meet him, he considered himself to be an “American,” although at the time he had lived in the United States for only one year, did not hold U.S. citizenship, and spoke almost no English. This identification is ambivalent because he confides that he believes that most Americans think Latinos are bad and troublemakers, and that in turn Latinos think Americans are racist. In his narrative we sense the tension between peers from different ethnic groups, and he reflects on the way Latino youth feel diminished in the eyes of the mainstream culture.

In time we have seen a shift into a multiple identity. Dario seems to be increasingly adapting to a style that incorporates customs from his original culture, from African American culture, and from mainstream American youth culture. His friends are mostly second-generation Latinos who understand but do not speak Spanish and maintain a value system deeply embedded in relationships. He identifies with the victimization and discrimination experienced by African Americans as well as with their strength and efforts for civil rights and justice. An important catalyst in this shift is the media—he watches MTV more than any other channel and considers talk show hosts as role models.

The immigration process has deeply affected Dario. Like his face, his social and psychological being are scarred—from multiple losses and separations, an unpredictable family situation, academic struggles, and discriminatory experiences. His process of adaptation is a process of identity shifts—from wounded to empowered and back, from the frustration of the classroom to perceived competence in the street.

Despite all the hardships, Dario demonstrates resilience and continues to strive. His resilience is fueled from two main sources. One is relational—he has supportive friends, counselors, and connections with extended family. In his relationships he is friendly, respectful, and responsible. The other aspect of his resilience is that of persistence and hope. He is still in school, he continues to try, he has aspirations, he is not hostile toward school and family. He is fascinated by street life but is not in gangs. He has not rejected academic goals.

Dario's story highlights the complex ways in which social and psychological influences interweave to shape immigrant children's paths in the United States. Dario is a child "hanging by a thread." In many ways he appears to have adjusted remarkably well, but the balance is fragile. For many immigrant youth, social influences have conspired in ways that have caused the threads to sever. For others, the threads have aligned to reinforce and weave together a process of social and academic adaptation.

Diverse paths of migration

Because immigrant youth are extraordinarily diverse, their experiences resist facile generalizations. Nearly 80 percent are youth of color, originating in Latin America, Asia, and the Caribbean. They bring with them an astonishingly wide array of linguistic, religious, and cultural beliefs and practices. Some are the children of highly educated professional parents, and others have parents who are illiterate, low skilled, and struggling in the lowest paid sectors of the service economy.³ Some families are escaping political, religious, or ethnic persecution; others are lured by the promise of better jobs and the hope for better educational opportunities. Some immigrant youth come to settle permanently; others follow their parents from one migrant work camp to another. Some are documented; others are not. Some engage in transnational strategies, often moving back and forth between their country of birth and their current home in the United States.⁴

Although some immigrant youth come from privileged backgrounds, many suffer from the challenges associated with poverty. Many arrive from poor origins while others experience downward mobility in the process of resettlement. Nearly a quarter of the children of immigrants live below the poverty line, compared to 11 percent of non-Hispanic whites. Nationwide, 37 percent of the children of immigrants report difficulties affording food and they are more than four times as likely as native-born children to live in crowded housing conditions. Children raised in circumstances of socioeconomic deprivation are vulnerable to an array of psychological distresses, including difficulties concentrating and sleeping,

anxiety, and depression as well as a heightened propensity for delinquency and violence.⁵

Poverty frequently coexists with a variety of other factors that augment risks, such as single parenthood; residence in neighborhoods plagued with violence, gang activity, and drug trade; and school environments that are segregated, overcrowded, and poorly funded.⁶ Many immigrant youth have virtually no direct, systematic, and intimate contact with middle-class white Americans.⁷ This segregation affects the kinds of English language encountered by these youth, the quality of schools they will attend, and their access to networks that facilitate entrance into desirable colleges and jobs.

Lost connections and family transitions

By any measure, immigration is one of the most stressful events a family can undergo. Immigrants must learn new cultural expectations and (often) a new language. They are stripped of many of their significant relationships, including family members, friends, and community relations.⁸ They also lose the social roles that provided them with culturally scripted notions of how they fit into the world. Without a sense of competence, control, and belonging, many immigrants feel marginalized. These changes in relationships, contexts, and roles are highly disorienting and nearly inevitably lead to a keen sense of loss.⁹

For many new arrivals, the principal motivation for migration is to be reunited with family members who emigrated earlier. For the majority of immigrant youth, the process of family reunification is a long, often painful, and disorienting ordeal. Data derived from the Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation (LISA) study, conducted at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, reveals that 85 percent of the youth underwent separation from one or both parents for periods from six months to more than ten years.¹⁰ Hence, separations are normative to the migratory process. During that time the children are nurtured by other caretakers, to whom they become attached. When a child is called upon to join her parents, although she is happy about the prospect of regaining

them, she also loses sustaining contact with her caretaker. After the reunification, youths often find themselves entering new family constellations that include parents who seem like strangers, as well as stepparents, stepsiblings, and siblings they have never met.

Immigrant parents' self-assurance and authority can be undermined both in the outside world and in the more intimate inner world of the family. Through schools, immigrant children typically come into closer contact with American culture than do their parents, who may be removed from American culture, often working in jobs with other immigrants and coethnics.¹¹ The relative rapidness of the child's absorption into the new culture sometimes creates tensions.¹² Immigrant parents frequently attempt to slow down the process, warning children not to act like other children in the new setting. They may also discipline their children in ways that are accepted in their country of origin but that may conflict with American norms. Because children typically learn English more quickly than their parents do, they often take on new roles as translators and advocates for their families. Culturally scripted family expectations are often challenged by migration.

Once settled in the new land, family members may discover that new obligations and necessities keep them from one another. Many immigrant parents (particularly those coming from poorer backgrounds) work in several jobs. These multiple obligations make them less available to their children than they were prior to migration. Immigrant parents feel that working hard is the best way to help their children, yet these long work hours leave many youth alone. This physical absence compounds the psychological unavailability that often accompanies parental anxiety and depression secondary to migration.¹³ Under such circumstances, connections beyond the immediate family may become all the more compelling.

Networks of relationships

Peers, community leaders, adults in schools, church members, and coaches are important in the adaptation of adolescents in general and appear to be particularly important to immigrant adolescents.¹⁴

These youth are often undergoing profound shifts in their sense of self and are struggling to negotiate changing circumstances in relationships with their parents. These other relationships can provide immigrant youth with compensatory attachments, information about new cultural norms and practices, and tools vital to success in school.

These social relations help immigrant youth and their families in significant ways to navigate the difficult currents and chart a steady course to a better life. They serve a number of functions. Immigrants rely on instrumental social support to provide them with tangible aid (such as running an errand or making a loan) as well as guidance and advice (including information about job and housing leads, cultural expectations in the new context, and the like), which are much needed by disoriented newcomers. Social companionship also serves to maintain and enhance self-esteem, as well as providing acceptance and approval. Quite predictably, a well-functioning social support network is closely linked to better adjustment to the new environment.

For immigrant adolescents, social worlds are also fundamental to the process of identity formation. Their development requires the usual challenges of adolescence complicated by a process of racial and ethnic identification. Indeed, entry into American identities today is by way of a culture of multiculturalism—one experiments, names, and performs identities by creating a hyphenated self. These new identities, crafted in the process of immigrants' uprooting and resettlement, are fluid and multilayered.

This volume

First- and second-generation immigrant youth currently constitute 20 percent of the children growing up in the United States. Thus their healthy development has fundamental long-term implications for our society. As we have seen, immigrant youth undergo a host of changes that can have lasting impacts on their development.

Their journeys follow complex paths—often bifurcating into divergent experiences and varied outcomes. Some youth thrive through immigration; others struggle to cope. It is essential that we deepen our understanding of the factors that influence the development of the burgeoning immigrant youth population.

The present issue of *New Directions for Youth Development* explores in detail some of the major social influences that shape immigrant children's paths in their transition to the United States, and the complex interconnections among those influences. Three of the chapters present data gathered as part of the LISA study. This five-year interdisciplinary and comparative study was directed by Carola Suárez-Orozco and Marcelo Suárez-Orozco and funded by the National Science Foundation, the W.T. Grant Foundation, and the Spencer Foundation. The LISA study for five years followed four hundred immigrant children (ages nine to fourteen at the beginning of the study) who came from five regions (China, Central America, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Mexico) to the Boston and San Francisco areas. This interdisciplinary project utilized a variety of methods, including structured student and parent interviews, ethnographic observations, projective and objective measures, reviews of school records and behavior checklists, and teacher questionnaires and interviews. These data provide new glimpses into the world of immigrant youth.

Dario's case study poignantly illustrates the interconnection of multiple social influences on one particular youth's path of migration. The rest of this volume delves into a number of social worlds that can contribute to the positive development of immigrant youth. Our contributing authors also provide insight into who and what are the sources of information about viable identity pathway options. The chapters offer new data on the developmental opportunities and challenges that family roles and responsibilities, school contexts, community organizations, religious involvement and beliefs, gendered expectations, and media influences present to immigrant youth. They also provide insight into the research, practice, and policy implications of these social worlds.

Notes

1. The name used for this case study is a pseudonym; some details have been changed to protect identities. This case study is one of eighty collected by the Harvard Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation study. The ethnographic observations for this case study were conducted by Jeanette Adames; Marcelo Suárez-Orozco and Desiree Qin-Hilliard contributed to the analysis.

2. From "Song of myself," *Leaves of grass*.

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