

The Role of Gender in Immigrant Children's Educational Adaptation

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Abstract

Recent scholarship across many ethnic groups in the United States has consistently shown strong gender differences favoring girls in educational outcomes. This paper examines four areas of research that may shed light on why immigrant girls tend to do better than boys in schools: parental expectations after migration, socialization at home, relations at school, and gendered processes of acculturation and identity formation. The paper concludes that gender is an important segmenting factor in the adaptation and future mobility of the new generation. More in-depth research studies are needed to understand why and how gender makes a difference in the adaptation of children from different immigrant communities. The intersection of gender, ethnicity, and social class and how it impacts immigrant children's education and adjustment can be a particularly fruitful area for future research.

Introduction

At the beginning of the twentieth century, men attained significantly higher levels of education than women. One hundred years later the role of gender in education has come full circle (Lopez, 2003). This unprecedented shift in education is particularly pronounced in immigrant and minority student populations (Lopez, 2003). Recent scholarship on the educational outcomes of children of post-1965 "new immigrants" across ethnic communities in the United States has consistently shown strong gender differences favoring girls, suggesting that gender may be an important segmenting factor in the adaptation and future mobility of the new second generation. This paper aims to theorize the role of gender through reviewing scholarly research and presenting some of the findings from my research with Chinese immigrant children.

The term "immigrant children" is used interchangeably with the term "immigrant second generation," referring to children from immigrant families that include both first-generation (i.e., foreign born) and second-generation (U.S.-born) children. Many of the gender-related issues they face are similar because of their families' cultural backgrounds.

Gender and Immigrant Children's Educational Adaptation

As "one of the fundamental social relations anchoring and shaping immigration patterns," gender has been largely ignored in early research on immigration (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2003, p.3; Passar, 2003). Until the last two decades, studies focused heavily on the experiences of adult men. Not until the 1980s did scholars conducting research on immigration begin to examine the experiences of immigrant women (Simon & Brettell, 1986). In the 1990s researchers begin to broaden their focus to study "gender as a social system," and its effect on men and women's adaptation after migration (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1999). Current theorists conceptualize gender as "an organizing principle in all social systems, including work, politics, everyday interactions,

families, economic development, law, education, and a host of other social domains" (Howard et al., 1997, p. ix).

The role of gender has been particularly under-theorized in studies of immigrant children (Suarez-Orozco & Qin, 2006). In most studies, it is either ignored or treated as an individual-level control factor in statistical analyses. Controlling for gender is a far cry from in-depth analyses of the role of gender and of understanding "how, when, and why it makes a difference to be male or female" in immigrant children's adaptation (Eckes & Trautner, 2000, p.10). Regarding the adaptation of immigrant children, gender represents an important structure and organizing principle, layered with different social meanings. Not only does it intersect with culture, it wields a powerful force in shaping students' experiences in different locales such as family and school. It dictates different ways immigrant boys and girls are socialized at home according to their native culture (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001), and it embodies norms and practices to which the immigrant child is expected to adapt in the new cultural context, for example at schools (Williams Alvarez & Hauck, 2002). Gender shapes an immigrant child's identity formation, "both in a process of labeling from the outside and in the construction of a subjective identity" (Prieur, 2002, p. 53).

Theorizing the role of gender in immigrant children's adaptation and future mobility is especially important considering the emerging evidence of gendered pathways, which reveal that boys lag behind girls in academic settings across many ethnic groups (e.g., Brandon 1991; Faliciano & Rumbaut, 2005; Gibson, 1988; Lee, 2001; Qin, 2004; Waters, 1996). At the pre-collegial level, researchers have found strong gender differences in grades, academic engagement, high school completion, and future aspirations. In her research on students of Mexican heritage, Gibson (1993) found that girls did better than boys in terms of grades and attitudes toward school. In their report on second generation youth with various Latino and Asian origins, Portes and Rumbaut (2001) found that boys were less engaged, had significantly lower grades, and lower career and educational goals than did girls. Other researchers found similar gender trends in their study of children from immigrant families (e.g., Kao & Tienda, 1995; Qin 2003; Rumbaut, 1995). Tracing the educational experiences of the California participants in the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study over ten years, Faliciano and Rumbaut (2005) found that males lagged behind females in educational aspirations and expectations beginning from junior high school and were less likely to pursue further education over time.

This gender pattern in pre-collegial education has historical origins as well. Olneck and Lazerson (1974) summarized studies of early 20th century levels of secondary-school attainment in four U.S. cities and found that immigrant girls completed more years of high school than immigrant boys did among most ethnic groups. Collegial level data also indicates that females, who used to lag behind males, are catching up quickly and are outperforming the males fast in most ethnic groups. The 2003-2004 data show that college-enrolled students included 54% white females, 57% Latinas and 60% African American female students respectively. For Asian American students, females have now caught up with males, although eight years ago they

were lagging behind (King, 2006). Students from immigrant families constitute the majority in both the Latino and Asian groups as a result of post-1965 "New Immigration."¹

Educational outcomes are important indicators of the future social and economic mobility of the immigrant second generation. This is particularly relevant in today's segmented labor market, which limits opportunities of those with low levels of formal education. Ginorio and Huston's (2001) review showed that Latinas with a bachelor's degree earned 82% more than those without a BA; Latino males with a bachelor's degree earned 60% more than their counterparts with only a high school diploma. Research across ethnic groups suggests that immigrant girls and boys have different levels of educational attainment that are directly linked with their potential future mobility. Brandon's (1991) study of Asian American high school seniors showed that females reached higher levels of educational attainment than males and did so at a faster rate. Rong and Brown (2001) found that African and Caribbean immigrant black females outperformed their male counterparts in schooling attainment. Cammarota's (2002) research with Latino students found that girls were more likely to graduate and attend college, while boys were more likely to be pushed out of school and tracked into low paying work. Examining why the gendered pathways occur can help education policy and incite target intervention programs to promote the educational success of all immigrant children.

Research based on mainstream white students indicates that the gender gap may be attributed to the perception that school is a feminine institution where teachers favor girls in classroom settings (Kleinfeld, 1998; Connell, 2000). For immigrant children, however, the underlying mechanisms for gender effects may be different from the general student population, because their experiences are often markedly different from mainstream students due to language barriers, acculturation stress, discrimination, and other characteristics unique to immigrants.

Understanding Why Gender Gaps in Immigrant Education Exist

The following section reviews current research to understand why gender gaps may exist in the education of children from immigrant families. I also present some of the findings from my research drawing on data from the Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation Study (LISA), part of the Harvard Immigration Project led by Marcelo and Carola Suarez-Orozco. The LISA study, launched in 1997, was a five-year longitudinal study of adaptation of recent immigrant students from China, Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Haiti and Central America. The sample consisted of about 400 recently arrived immigrant students enrolled in over fifty schools in and around Boston and San Francisco. I systematically examined the role of gender in the educational adaptation of Chinese immigrant students in my doctoral research. I have also done some additional analyses of the entire LISA sample.

Parental Expectations after Migration

One factor contributing to educational gender gaps may be the gender role shift after migration that impacts parental expectations of children. In many home countries of new wave

¹ This "New Immigration" refers to the wave of immigration that started after the passage of the Hart-Celler Act in 1965, which abolished the national origin quota system, established a seven-category preference system for the unification of families and for persons with needed skills, and set an equal 20,000 per-country limit.

immigrants (e.g., China), gender discrimination and inequality are "historically deeply rooted" (Kwong, 2000, p. 37). In China's case, despite contemporary social and economic transformations, gender parity has lagged behind external social conditions and gender gaps in employment, education, and other social sectors persist. The cultural trend to favor boys is particularly pronounced in rural areas, where the number of girls enrolled decreases sharply from middle school to high school. It is not rare for rural families to ask an older daughter to give up her studies in order to work to support her brother's schooling (Cheung, 1996). However, my research based on 80 Chinese immigrant children and their families found no gender differences in parental educational expectations after immigration. This is true whether the parents reside in urban or rural areas.

There are two likely explanations for this. One is that the situation in the U.S. is quite different from that of rural China. In the U.S., basic public education is free. Many school systems can provide free lunches to low-income students. As a result, parents are more likely to be able to afford sending both their daughter and son to school. This may result in fewer structural or economic constraints to girls' education in the U.S. Furthermore, mainstream U.S. society values gender equity more than Chinese society, and there are more opportunities for women to be successful in the U.S. One reason that parents in rural China invest less in girls' education is that they count on their sons to provide for their old age. In the U.S., parents may see that their daughters can also support them in their old age. Therefore, migration may produce more gender equality in Chinese immigrant families, particularly in terms of parental educational expectations. Other researchers have discovered that parents may also be more likely to support girls' education in the U.S. than in their countries of origin, because they perceive their daughter's education and future job opportunities as closely linked to the family's sense of "making it" in the U.S. (Dasgupta, 1998; Gibson, 1988; Lee, 1997; Olsen, 1997; Zhou 1992). However, raised parental expectations in girls' education after migration may not necessarily be a sign of immigrant parents rejecting traditional gender roles; instead it marks a response to the opportunities and necessities for both girls and boys to receive education (Zhou & Bankston, 2001).

Socialization at Home: A Gendered Process

Gendered socialization at home, particularly around monitoring and control, is another factor impacting educational outcomes in immigrant children. Ethnographic research has consistently shown that across ethnic groups, when regulating their children's activities outside the house, immigrant parents usually place much stricter controls on their daughters than their sons (Gibson, 1988; Lee, 2001; Sarroub, 2001; Waters, 1996). Findings from the LISA study indeed suggest that both children and parents indicated that girls were supervised much more strictly than boys in daily activities and dating. Children had a clear perception of their parents' double standards in supervision. For example, a 15-year-old Chinese girl, Lili, said:

[If I were a boy] I [could] stay out late at night. They would not be as strict to me as they are now. They do not care too much about my elder brother. Also, they would not be as nosy if I were a boy; they always want to know about me and my things. If I were a boy, I probably would have more freedom. (Qin, 2004, p. 106)

Such parental monitoring, though restrictive by mainstream standards, carries implications for immigrant girls' psychosocial development (Espiritu, 2001) and may have auxiliary benefits to girls' schooling. It minimizes girls' exposure to violence and toxic environments, particularly in inner-city contexts (Smith, 2002). As a result of stricter parental control, girls are likely to spend more time at home, focusing more on their studies than boys.

Zhou and Bankston's (2001) research with Vietnamese girls showed that high levels of parental control contributed to educational success. Smith's (1999) work with women of Mexican heritage in New York shows a similar pattern: heavy monitoring may benefit girls by keeping them focused on activities that keep them away from the lure of the street and its potential to (in the best of cases) be distracted and (in the worst of cases) be drawn into illicit activities. Some researchers have also found that immigrant girls have more positive attitudes toward school than boys (Lee, 1997, 2001; Sarroub, 2001; Waters, 1996). These positive attitudes may stem from girls' view of school as a liberating social space where they are free from their parents' heavy monitoring (Olsen, 1997), and their instrumental view of education as "empowerment against tradition." (Keaton, 1999). From these girls' perspective, a good education may give them more leverage in future schooling and marriage.

Gendered Relations at School

As in the home, school is also a highly gendered institution (Williams, Alvarez & Hauck, 2002). Girls and boys often have very different experiences in school. Boys tend to be more rambunctious. Teachers are less understanding of them and more likely to discipline them harshly than they would girls (Gillock & Midgley, 2000; Ginorio & Huston, 2001; Lopez, 2003). A related critical difference between boys and girls is in the realm of social relationships and support. Findings from the LISA study with Chinese students suggest that compared with boys, girls were more likely to have friends who were serious about schoolwork and supportive of academics. Girls also had better relationships with their teachers and perceived more social support at school than boys did. In a series of studies of Mexican-American adolescent social networks within schools, Stanton-Salazar (2001) also found that boys' school-based relationships were less supportive. Peer pressure for boys to engage in problem behaviors (e.g., joining gangs, getting into fights) was stronger than for girls (Gibson, 1988; Qin, 2004; Smith, 1999; Waters, 1996). These deviant activities were often a response to negative experiences at school. The Chinese students, for example, discussed at length experiences of being bullied or discriminated against by non-immigrant students. While both girls and boys experienced bullying, boys were more likely than girls to be involved in gangs as a way of fighting back to protect themselves. This inevitably compromised their educational pursuits. Such was the case for Carl, a fourteen-year-old boy who often witnessed other students throwing things at Chinese students and calling them "retarded." He began to feel that uniting the Chinese students into a gang might provide protection for him and his Chinese peers. Carl organized a group of 7th grade boys who called themselves "wicked kids." According to him, group members are:

people from the same ethnic group who do not want to be bullied. The strongest (or the most powerful one) takes on the position as the big brother. He will take care of the weaker ones...the group is for protecting [us] from the foreigners.

Carl's academic performance declined sharply after he became involved in gangs. For him, cutting classes was no big deal. He claimed that the first period was for sleeping; he never knew who taught the first period. In the classes he did attend, he was very inattentive. His teachers worried that sooner or later he would drop out of school (Qin, 2004).

The Role of Gender in Acculturation and Ethnic Identity Formation

Gendered processes of ethnic identity formation and acculturation may be another important factor contributing to gendered educational outcomes. Immigration research suggests that there is a link between patterns of acculturation, identity formation, and immigrants' adaptation. The classic straight-line assimilation model, largely based on experiences of European immigrants arriving in the beginning of the twentieth century (Parks, 1950), emphasized immigrants' "unilinear, nonreversible, and continuous" process of acculturation and structural assimilation, that moves toward the finishing line of "the middle-class, white, Protestant, European American framework of the dominant society" (Suárez-Orozco, 2000, p. 8). Ethnicity is eventually reduced to something primarily "symbolic" (Gans, 1992) and "optional" (Alba & Nee, 1997). However, this classic assimilation theory has been under intense critique from scholars (Alba & Nee, 1997; Rumbaut, 2005; Suárez-Orozco, M. et al., D. B., 2001). Most immigration researchers today argue that earlier models of assimilation need to be reframed in light of the new circumstances facing the post-1965 immigrants: new immigrants are mostly people of color and are more likely to suffer from discrimination than their earlier European counterparts. Additionally, the current "hour-glass" shaped economy makes it harder for immigrants who arrive in the U.S. with limited education to achieve mobility over time, compared with economic opportunities in earlier years (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2001; Portes & Zhou, 1993).

A central premise in current research suggests that, contrary to the classic assimilation model, preserving parental language, culture, and ties to the ethnic community while adapting to the mainstream society can facilitate adaptation and upward social mobility. For example, Gibson (1988) found that Punjabi immigrant students did better in school because they "accommodated" to the mainstream society without full assimilation: they adopted select mainstream cultural values while maintaining cultural values of particular importance to them. Conversely, full assimilation into the host culture that alienates an immigrant child from his or her culture is associated with negative adaptation outcomes. The Suárez-Orozcos' (1995) research with Mexican immigrants shows that, contrary to the classic assimilation model, immigrants who become more assimilated over longer periods of residence in the U.S., frequently experience downward mobility. In their segmented assimilation model, Portes and Rumbaut (1996, 2001) concluded that for second generation immigrants, the most beneficial form of incorporation into the U.S. society is selective acculturation, which combines rapid economic mobility with deliberate preservation of their immigrant community's solidarity and values.

Gender differences in immigrant children's processes of incorporation into U.S. society may contribute to different adaptation outcomes, including educational achievement. Indeed, some scholarly research has documented gendered processes of acculturation and ethnic identity formation among immigrant children, both in terms of maintaining their own ethnic and native identity and in terms of flexibility to develop a bicultural identity that tends to lead to the best adaptation outcomes (e.g., Schwartz & Montgomery, 2002; Lee, 2002; Waters, 1996; Qin, 2003). My analyses drawing on the five-year LISA data on over 400 students from China, Mexico,

Haiti, and the Dominican Republic and elsewhere in Central America, found that although in the first year there were no gender differences in ethnic identities among immigrant students, after five years boys were significantly less likely than girls to identify with their culture of origin. This trend held true for all four ethnic groups, and the gender effect was particularly strong for Dominican, Central American, and Haitian boys (Qin, 2003). Another line of research suggests that immigrant girls appear to have more flexibility in constructing an ethnic identity compared to boys (Olsen, 1997; Rumbaut, 1996; Waters, 1999). For example, Waters (1997) found that Caribbean girls seemed to have more leeway in identity formation than their male counterparts, who tend to face more pressure to form a racial identity due to perceptions of discrimination and unfair treatment from the mainstream society. Similarly, both Rumbaut (1996) and Olsen (1997) found that immigrant girls were more likely than boys to choose "additive" or "hyphenated identities," indicating attempts to bridge the two cultures.

In summary, the boundaries between ethnic identities appear to be less fluid and less permeable for boys than for girls. Boys seem to have more difficulty in assuming bicultural competencies and making successful bicultural adjustments (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Waters, 1996). This challenge relates at least in part to the highly racialized identities and negative expectations imposed upon immigrants by the dominant society. Immigrant boys of color are particularly more likely to perceive that they are unwelcome by mainstream society. This likely contributes to their lower levels of future educational aspirations and negatively impacts their achievement motivation and engagement in school.

In examining the role of gender in immigrant children's educational adaptation, it is particularly important to understand the intersection of ethnic and gender identities, which can shed light on immigrant children's educational adaptation. In a recent paper (Qin, under review) on ethnic and gender identity formation among Chinese immigrant students, I examined the gender expectations girls and boys received at home and school and the gendered processes under which students negotiate these expectations. I found that while both girls and boys experienced conflicting expectations of being a good Chinese girl/boy and being a popular girl/boy in school, they differed in how they negotiated their identities. Girls appeared to relate more firmly to their ethnic and gender identities, constructing identities against the image of "popular girls" at school. Boys were under more pressure to conform to gendered expectations at school and focused increasingly on non-academic related activities, such as sports and video games, over time. The different expectations and manifestations of femininity and masculinity are also demonstrated in Gibson's (1991) research with West Indian immigrant youth. She found that while girls expressed their femininity by obeying school rules and behaving well, boys tended to demonstrate their masculinity through defying school regulations. There seems to be more alignment between schooling and femininity while masculinity and schooling are perceived as oppositional. The intersection of gender, ethnicity, and social class, and how the intersection impacts immigrant children's motivation and achievement, can be a particularly fruitful area for future research.

Finally, while most of the research examined in this paper has documented immigrant girls' advantages over boys in schools, it is important to recognize that gender roles and expectations differ within and between cultures. The complex, lived experiences of immigrant children from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds often surpass the broad processes described above.

Some research shows that girls from some ethnic groups face significant challenges translating their high educational achievement and expectations into higher educational attainment and social mobility. One challenge immigrant girls may face involves conflicting messages they receive from school and from their family members about education (Canedy, 2001; Gibson, 1988; Sarroub, 2001). Sometimes immigrant girls receive confusing messages from different people in their families. For example, the mother of one Latina girl in Canedy's (2001) study encouraged her to be independent and have a career while her grandmother constantly begged her to grow her hair long, put on more makeup, and find a good man. Another Latina commented, "everybody is changing the rules; we're supposed to be independent, but you still have that machismo factor in your brain" (Canedy 2001, A1). Such conflicting messages can impede educational progress. For many immigrant girls from traditional cultures with stricter gender roles than those in the mainstream U.S., a feeling of lack of control over their future may also contribute to diminished achievement motivation after secondary school (Sarroub, 2001; Olsen, 1997). Immigrant girls who have positive attitudes toward school and are motivated to excel often find that their education beyond the secondary level is determined by their parents' permission. Some traditional parents perceive too much education as "dangerous" for girls, fearing it could drive them away from home and make them too independent (Sarroub, 2001). Many girls do not know what will happen to them in their near futures. Sometimes parents do not allow them to go to college, particularly when it is far from home, even though they may have a high level of educational achievement (Wolf, 1997). For these girls, doing well in school cannot guarantee a secure future. There are other underlying factors as well to girls' potential disadvantages in educational outcomes, such as teenage pregnancy, overly demanding responsibilities at home, and limited public role models (Canedy, 2001; Lee, 2001; Sarroub, 2001). It is important for future research to continue examining how gender shapes immigrant children's education and adaptation beyond gender differences, to uncover the unique challenges facing immigrant girls and boys respectively.

Conclusions

Today, one out of five children attending public schools in the U.S. is a child from an immigrant family. How immigrant children adapt to their new cultural setting is having a transformative effect in the American society (Rumbaut, 2005). The role of gender has become a pressing issue in immigration, education and beyond. As leading immigration scholars Portes and Rumbaut (2001) contend:

gender enters the picture in an important way because of the different roles that boys and girls occupy during adolescence and the different ways in which they are socialized....We expect...gender differences to affect important adaptation outcomes such as language acculturation, aspirations, and academic achievement. Because of the different roles that adolescent boys and girls are expected to play in American society, we can also anticipate significant gender effects on various dimensions of psychosocial adaptation, including self-esteem.
(p. 64)

As one of the most fundamental constituents of a society's symbolic system, as well as an individual's self-concept, gender powerfully shapes the adaptation trajectories and experiences of immigrant children. Examining the role of gender can contribute to the field of immigration and education by helping scholars assess children's diverse processes of adaptation after

migration and helping educators build more effective intervention programs that better address challenges children face in their lived, nuanced experiences. The benefits of these endeavors will extend beyond immigrant communities, as in an era of globalization and large-scale immigration, the education and well-being of immigrant children is directly linked with the well-being of American society.

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