



Mother's age at arrival in the United States and early cognitive development[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the cognitive development of young children from diverse backgrounds with a particular focus on ethnic and nativity differences in home environments. Hypotheses are developed addressing the extent to which home environment and parenting practices mediate the relationship between mother's age at arrival and cognitive development in early childhood. Data from the first two waves of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth cohort are employed. Children whose mothers arrived in the United States at the youngest ages (0–7 years) have similar cognitive scores to children whose mothers are born in the United States once socioeconomic status and family background are considered. Multivariate analyses indicate parenting practices and home environment are associated with cognitive development and act as partial mediators between cognitive scores and mother's age at arrival. Overall, the results highlight the need to consider parental migration experiences and differences in the home environments of children of immigrants in the United States as sources of variation in outcomes for the second-generation.

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The recent growth of immigration to the United States has focused attention on the growing proportion of children living in immigrant families and the potential for different outcomes for these children than those in native families. There is great diversity in the socioeconomic, educational, and residential statuses among children of immigrants. If these children start out in a disadvantaged position based on the family environment present in early childhood, it seems likely that they will be at risk for poor school readiness and achievement. On the other hand, there is some evidence that immigrant status may be protective or beneficial for some children either because of the selective nature of migration or other shared characteristics of new arrivals (Feliciano, 2005; Leventhal, Xue, & Brooks Gunn, 2006; Quintana et al., 2006). Thus, parental migration experience may be particularly important for children's outcomes. Immigrant parents arrive with different resources and preferences but also at different points in the life course. Here we explore the extent to which parents' age at migration forecasts differential outcomes for their own children in the United States.

The antecedents of cognitive development and subsequent academic achievement likely originate, in part, from characteristics of the home environment, access to resources, and parenting practices evident in the years of early childhood (Linver, Brooks-Gunn, & Kohen, 2002; Figueroa-Moseley, Ramey, Kellner, & Lanzi, 2006). But despite the importance of the topic, the role of migration status on young children's developmental outcomes has been difficult to establish (Cabrera, Shannon, West, & Brooks Gunn, 2006; Lopez, Barrueco, & Miles, 2006). Sample size constraints limit the ability of researchers to focus on pre-school-age children from diverse immigrant groups and to follow their developmental pathways over time. Another

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limitation is that conceptual models to study nativity differences in children's outcomes often focus on the interaction of social institutions (like schools) and home environments. There is less theoretical guidance to predict developmental divergence before school when children are most insulated from the broader social context (Garcia Coll, 1990).

This paper investigates cognitive development in infancy/toddlerhood as one of several indicators of the starting position of children of immigrants. We are particularly interested in the extent to which the age at which immigrant mothers arrive in the United States is associated with differential outcomes. We hypothesize that differences in the home environments and parenting practices used in the United States mediate the relationship between mother's age at migration and children's cognitive scores at 24 months.

1. Mother's age at arrival

In a simple assimilation model, the longer immigrants live in the United States, the more they experience social norms and expectations consistent with social institutions in the United States and the more their outcomes, or their children's outcomes, will resemble those of the majority native population (Alba & Nee, 2003). Children born in the United States are influenced by their family's immigration history and reception in the United States (Hernandez & Charney, 1998). There is a great deal of diversity in the outcomes of children in the second-generation (i.e. U.S.-born children of immigrants) such that some scholars suggest outcomes will lead to a 'segmented' pattern of assimilation (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Zhou, 1997). But there is less agreement on the source of these differences within the second generation. Some of these children may face a lower likelihood of educational or economic success in the United States than their counterparts in the third and higher generations (i.e. children born in the United States to parents born in the United States) because some children in the second generation will experience racial and ethnic discrimination as well as residential or school segregation in the United States (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Zhou, 1997). Others find more positive outcomes for the second-generation that may stem from positive parental influence, involvement, and encouragement (Fuligni, 2001; Glick & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007; Kao & Tienda, 1995).

But parents' migration experiences remain an understudied factor in outcomes for U.S.-born children of immigrants (i.e. the second-generation). It may be that a pattern of divergent outcomes for children in the second generation is associated not only with their parents' nativity but the circumstances of migration. This goes beyond simply considering length of time in the United States to a consideration of when in the life course these parents became exposed to the receiving society. This may be an important consideration because age at arrival in the United States is associated with different outcomes for the immigrants themselves.

There is some support for the idea that immigration in childhood is associated with better academic and earnings outcomes in adulthood than arriving at an older age. The exact age of vulnerability may vary according to the country of origin, linguistic, and economic similarities with the receiving context (Van Ours & Veenman, 2006). The vulnerable age hypothesis suggests that children who arrive in the receiving context at an earlier age are more successful at acquiring necessary language skills and, therefore, do better academically than those who arrive at older ages (Cahan, Davis, & Staub, 2001). In the United States, the greatest educational similarities to the third and higher generation occur for those who arrive well before the end of elementary school. Those who arrive at younger ages before the introduction to formal schooling or in the first few years of schooling, sometimes referred to as the 1.5 generation, appear to have higher academic progress and educational attainment than those who arrive after schooling is underway (Glick & White, 2003; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

At the other end of childhood are immigrants who arrive as teenagers and may never "drop in" to attend school in the United States. These immigrants exhibit lower ultimate educational attainment than those who either attend school in the United States or those who arrive as adults with higher education from their country of origin (Fry, 2007). We suggest that the differences in the age at which first-generation parents arrive in the United States may contribute to the variation in outcomes observed in the second generation. Our analyses explore the possibility of different outcomes emerging among second-generation children even in their early childhood.

Parenting styles vary according to generational status and language use (as proxies for acculturation differences) (Isapa et al., 2004). We extend this observation to explore the role of mothers' experience in the United States, as captured by her own age at arrival in the United States. The age at arrival in the United States may be associated with parenting styles and this, in turn, may partially mediate the relationship between parental migration and children's own cognitive development (Cabrera et al., 2006). Parental involvement and expectations account for generation status differences in subsequent educational attainment among adolescents (Fuligni, 1997). Immigrant parents' optimism and encouragement are identified as protective factors in the face of structural disadvantages in the United States and may help explain why some children from the second-generation do better in school than their immigrant or third and higher generation counterparts (Glick & White, 2004; Kao & Tienda, 1995). Looking even earlier in the educational process, Leventhal et al. (2006) compare school-age children's verbal trajectories by nativity within racial/ethnic groups and find positive outcomes for immigrant children. Although limited to children who could be tested in English, these children of immigrants experience great growth over time even though they started behind their co-ethnic peers from native families.

Additional work on young children of immigrants focuses on the home environment and relationships between first-generation parents and their second-generation offspring as key to explaining differential trajectories. Von Figueroa-Moseley, Ramey, Kellner, & Lanzi (2006) illustrate that there are differences in parental practices among Latino subgroups. Overall, parental responsiveness is associated with the academic achievement among these children of Latino immigrant groups. In

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