

# Adaptation Processes among Young Immigrants: An Integrative Review

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**ABSTRACT.** The population of children and teenagers who are either immigrants themselves or children of immigrants has been rapidly increasing in recent years. Young immigrants have a significant impact on the social and cultural makeup of many American communities, and on the education system in particular. In light of this, this paper provides a review of studies that were conducted on the adaptation processes among this new "second generation youth." Studies are classified into those that examined the issues of young immigrants' adaptation from the psychological/social-psychological and sociological perspectives. Subsequently, theoretical research on adolescent immigrants' adaptation is reviewed.

**KEYWORDS.** Immigration, adaptation, children, youth

The effects of immigration on the social, cultural, political, and economic fabric of the American society are hard to deny. Currently, immigrants constitute 12.4% of the American population, which translates to over 35 million people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005 American Community Survey). Due to sustained flows of immigrants primarily from Latin America and Asia, this proportion is likely to increase in the near future. Immigrant population is not only rapidly growing, but it consists

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of an increasing number of children and teenagers. In 2000, one in five children in American public schools was either a child of immigrants or an immigrant him or herself. This proportion is expected to increase to one in three by the year 2020 (Williams, Alvarez, & Hauck, 2002). Some areas of the country are affected by the growing numbers of young immigrants more than others. For instance, according to Kochhar, Suro, and Tafoya (2005), the Hispanic school-age population (ages 5–17) in the new settlement areas of the South grew by 322% and the population of preschoolers (age 4 or younger) increased by 382% between 1990 and 2000.

Sparked by the rising numbers of young immigrants, the significant effect they have on the makeup of American communities, and on the future of the country, an increasing number of studies have been devoted to examining the adaptation processes among the “new second generation” ethnics (e.g., Portes, 1996; Portes & MacLeod, 1996; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Zhou, 1997a). Most of the studies on the subject included foreign born young immigrants, those who immigrated to the U.S. as young children (one-and-a-half generation), and children of contemporary immigrants who were born in the U.S. under one investigation (e.g., Harker, 2001; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001, 2006; Rumbaut, 1994; Zhou & Bankston, 1994; Zhou & Xiong, 2005). Such studies on the post-settlement adaptation examined the phenomena from a number of different perspectives, including those of psychological/socio-psychological and sociological nature. They will be reviewed in the following pages of this manuscript and then a short overview of theoretical frameworks used to model immigrants’ adaptation will be provided.

### ***PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIO/PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDIES ON ADOLESCENT IMMIGRANTS’ ADAPTATION***

Research that investigated adaptation of children and teenagers from the psychological/ socio-psychological standpoint can be divided into two main groups: 1) One that focused on adaptational outcomes among immigrants, including examining whether young newcomers experience higher rates of social, emotional, and behavioral adjustment problems than the native-born population, and 2) One that attempted to identify factors that may either cause the adjustment problems among young immigrants, or that may serve as protective factors in adolescents’ adaptation. These two strands of literature will be briefly described and then studies on young



immigrants' adaptation conducted from the sociological perspective will be examined.

***Do Young Newcomers Experience Higher Rates of Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Adjustment Problems Than the Native-Born Population?***

As Aronowitz (1984) argued, migration between countries "entailing significant cultural change, is necessarily attended by relatively grave psychological risks for children" (p. 241). Similarly, Portes, and Rumbaut (2006) commented that, "long distance journeys entail a set of engulfing life events (losses, changes, conflicts, and demands) that, although varying widely in kind and degree, severely test the immigrant's emotional resilience. Migration can produce profound psychological distress, even among the best prepared and most motivated and even under the most receptive of circumstances" (p. 169).

The majority of early studies on the subject have suggested that immigration leads to children's experiencing many social and emotional adjustment problems, as well as behavioral and psychological disorders such as anxiety, aggression, depression, inability to tolerate frustration, low self esteem, identity problems, and poor relations with peers (Ashworth, 1975; Bagley, 1972; Gaertner-Harnach, 1981; Goldenberg, 1973). Similarly, Williams and Berry (1991) argued that refugee children are at risk for delinquency, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, alcohol and drug abuse, and psychopathological problems. Jacob and Blais (1991, c.f., Ma, 2002) confirmed these findings and observed that younger refugees experiencing trauma developed sleep and eating disorders and developmental problems, while older children exhibited depression, fear, anxiety, and learning difficulties. More contemporary research conducted by Portes and Rumbaut (2001) examined two critical aspects of immigrant children's psychological well-being: self esteem and depressive affect measured at two points in time – at the age of 14 and 17. Their findings showed that self esteem scores increased from the first to the second survey by about 10% (from the baseline of 37.8%), but that there was no change in the depressive symptoms initially exhibited by almost a third of junior high school students. Significant differences by gender and by national origin were observable in both levels of self esteem and depressive symptoms, with girls being more depressed than boys and the lowest levels of self esteem being recorded among Vietnamese, Lao, Hmong, and Cambodians. Moreover, students attending unsafe schools reported lower self esteem and

higher depressive symptoms, while "good teaching and fair and supportive learning climate" (p. 210) was associated with their higher psychological well-being.

Studies conducted by Mena, Padilla, and Maldonado (1987), Padilla, Alvarez, and Lindholm (1986), and Padilla, Wagatsuma, and Lindholm (1985) indicated that first generation immigrant college students experienced higher levels of acculturative stress than young adults of longer generational tenure. Moreover, those who moved when they were younger than 12 years of age experienced less acculturative stress than those who immigrated later in life (Mena et al., 1987). Acculturative stress was defined as stress that is directly caused by the acculturative process and that results in emotional and behavioral problems such as anxiety, depression, identity confusion, and feelings of marginality and alienation (Saldago de Snyder, 1987; Williams & Berry, 1991). Hovey and King's (1996) study also revealed that almost a quarter of first and second generation Latino American adolescents displayed significant levels of depressive symptoms and about a quarter experienced critical levels of suicidal ideation. Depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation were related to high levels of acculturative stress. As Portes and Rumbaut (2006) argued with respect to all immigrants (not only children and adolescents), the context of reception, the context of exit (e.g., unprepared, distressed, and involuntary refugees, vs. prepared and voluntary migrants), social class, and time elapsed from arrival determine people's mental well-being after settlement.

Although early research (e.g., Sowell, 1981; Warner & Srole, 1945) has argued that the negative effects of immigration on mental status wane with increasing assimilation, more recent studies have shown that assimilation may lead to a deterioration of psychological health outcomes among children and teenagers (Harker, 2001; Hernandez & Charney, 1998; Portes & Zhou, 1993; Rumbaut, 1997). For instance, the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health found that the second generation adolescents had poorer health outcomes and were more likely to engage in risky behaviors than the first generation youth (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). This included missing school due to health or emotional problems, obesity, and being involved in delinquency, substance abuse, and violence. Among immigrant youth, length of stay in the host country was proportionally related to their likelihood of engagement in risky behaviors and in poor health outcomes. Similarly, Fuligni and Hardway (2004) found that children of immigrant parents were less likely than children of parents born in the U.S. to engage in delinquent or violent activity, early sexual intercourse, and substance abuse.



In an apparent contradiction to the research that highlighted the negative effects of immigration on adolescents' mental well-being, other studies have argued that once certain characteristics have been controlled for, the differences between mental, behavioral, and emotional well-being of immigrants and the native-born population disappear (Harker, 2001). These characteristics included age, gender, social class, and urban/rural residence in the U.S. and in the host country. Some of the findings even showed that after controlling for demographic variables, the incidence of psychological disorders was higher among the native-born population than among immigrants (Vega & Rumbaut, 1991). Similarly, based on a Canadian survey, Ma (2002) found that there were no statistically significant differences on any of the six outcome measures of behavioral and emotional problems between immigrant and non-immigrant children. The incidence of conduct disorder among immigrant children was low and the score for prosocial behavior was quite high. As Suarez-Orozco and Qin (2006) commented on the state of contemporary research in this area, "The literature on the psychopathology and well-being of immigrant youth provides little evidence to support the contention that immigrants are significantly more likely than non-immigrants to suffer from mental health challenges—in fact, there is a growing body of evidence to support the notion that first-generation immigrants do better than nonimmigrant in this regard" (p. 174).

### ***Factors That Cause Adjustment Problems or Serve As Protective Factors in Adolescents' Adaptation***

The second strand of psychological/socio-psychological literature has focused on explaining causes of potential disorders among immigrant children and adolescents or, conversely, identifying "protective factors" associated with immigrant status. Early studies that examined factors precipitating adjustment disorders divided them into those of intrapsychic and psychosocial nature (Aronowitz, 1984). First, many problems experienced by young immigrants, such as attachment and behavioral disorders, have been explained with the use of psychodynamic theory. In this scenario, immigration-induced traumatic separation from parents, and mothers in particular, has been seen as the root of the problems (Burke, 1980; Harding & Looney, 1977). Second, maladjustment of immigrant children has been attributed to cultural change or conflict (Nann, 1982; Rumbaut, 1994; Verdonk, 1982). Language difficulties, school failure, and prejudicial attitudes on the part of teachers and students were identified as the main causes of

adjustment disorders (Gelinek, 1974; Goldman & Taylor, 1969; Nguyen & Henkin, 1980).

In a study by Rumbaut (1994), parent-child conflict was the strongest predictor of poor self esteem and depression among immigrant children. Moreover, girls, children who were born in the U.S., those who perceived their family's socio-economic situation to worsen in the past five years, those whose father was unemployed or absent from home, those who had no-one at home to help with the schoolwork, and those who felt embarrassed by their parents, were found to experience more depression and lower self esteem. Experiences with discrimination elevated depressive symptoms, while expectation of discrimination was significantly associated with both increased depression and lowered self esteem. Conversely, English language proficiency, educational achievement, and educational aspirations were positively related to levels of self esteem and psychological well-being. Portes and Rumbaut (2001) also argued that intergenerational dissonance reduces parental control and is linked to diminished sense of self-worth and well-being among children. In their study, dissonant acculturation measured by the degree of parent-child conflict and feelings of embarrassment toward parents reduced levels of self esteem, as did past experiences with discrimination. Nagata (1989) identified stress associated with living up to the stereotype of overachieving Asian students and parental pressures to perform well in school as responsible for the adverse psychosocial developmental experiences among Japanese American children. Similarly, in a study of immigrant and second generation Filipina girls, Espiritu (2001) documented parental pressures to maintain the image of traditional Filipina womanhood as restricting the autonomy, mobility, and personal decision making of young females and often leading to cases of depression, rebellion, and even suicide.

Filipino immigrants were also the focus of a study by Ying and Han (2006), who used the same CILS (Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study) data set as Portes and Rumbaut (2001) to examine the effect of intergenerational conflict at home and racial discrimination at school on mental health and academic achievement of Filipino youth. Their results showed that intergenerational conflict was related to depression and low academic performance in early adolescence and from early to late adolescence. Moreover, discrimination at schools was related to increased depressive symptoms and lower academic achievement among younger Filipino youth. As such, their results confirmed previous research that showed a link between intergenerational conflict and mental health among children of Asian immigrants (Lee & Liu, 2001; Wolf, 1997; Ying, Lee, &



Tsai, 2004). Moreover, it was consistent with previous studies that showed the negative effects of discrimination on mental well-being of Asian immigrant children, adolescents, and young adults (Fisher, Wallace, & Fenton, 2000; Lee, 2003; Ying et al., 2004). Discrimination negatively affected not only Asian, but also other minority youth. García Coll and Szalacha (2004) argued that immigrant children arrive in schools with positive attitudes toward education, but due to discrimination, patronizing attitudes of school personnel, lower teacher expectations and generally lack of resources, soon they become disillusioned with the system. In some instances, schools may be even perceived as instruments of racial oppression (Shields & Behrman, 2004) or as "important settings within which immigrant and U.S.-born children of immigrants are introduced to the social hierarchies and racial barriers within American society" (Van Hook & Stamper Balistreri, 2002, p. 639).

Hernandez (2004) identified lower level of parental educational attainment in many immigrant families as additional source of strain on immigrant children's well-being and development. He argued that parents with low levels of education are less able to take advantage of institutional resources that could foster their children's success and assist them with their homework. Shields and Behrman (2004) stressed the fact that among children in immigrant families 72% speak a language other than English at home and 26% live in linguistically-isolated households where no one age 14 or older has a good command of English. Well-being of such children is likely to be negatively affected, as their families may experience problems accessing healthcare and other services, discussing issues with their teachers, and finding higher wage employment. In fact, 21% of children with immigrant parents live in poverty, as compared to 14% of children with U.S.-born parents (Shields & Behrman, 2004). Poverty can exacerbate problems with accessing healthcare for children and educational resources (Edelman & Jones, 2004). Children from immigrant families are more than twice as likely as children from U.S.-born families to experience multiple risk factors such as poverty or linguistic isolation that negatively affect their development (Hernandez, 2004).

However, Shields and Behrman (2004) also stressed that one needs to account for significant variations in challenges that immigrant children face depending on their country of origin. Thus, for example, while immigrants from other English speaking countries such as Canada, India, or Australia, as well as from Western and Central Europe tend to fare better, those from Mexico, Central America, and Indochina are usually at a significant disadvantage. A number of studies have also provided testimony to a significant

educational gap between immigrant children from Asia and many Latin American countries. For instance, while in 1990 74% of Mexicans age 15–17 were in school, the same was true for 95% of mainstream Americans and other immigrants (Schmid, 2001). Asian students also obtained higher scores in reading and math than Latino students and were more likely to remain in school (Schmid, 2001).

A certain amount of research has also focused on identifying factors associated with immigration status that shield children and adolescents from the negative effects of low socio-economic status and other detrimental factors (e.g., poorly educated parents, large number of siblings, and non-white ethnic background) on their mental well-being. For instance, Harker (2001) found that first generation immigrant adolescents experienced less depression and greater positive well-being than adolescents born in the U.S. who had similar backgrounds. She attributed it to the “protective factors” such as lack of conflict with parents, religious practices, parental supervision, and higher levels of social support among immigrants. These factors protecting youth from the poor well-being were to be eroded in subsequent generations. The important function of religiosity as a protective factor for immigrant youth who had experienced significant amounts of stress related to adaptation has also been documented by Bankston and Zhou (1995). Hovey and King (1996), on the other hand, confirmed that students with high levels of family support reported less acculturative stress and that emotional closeness with parents was more important than physical closeness. Similarly, Portes and Rumbaut (2001) observed that “strong family and ethnic community affiliations support the psychosocial adaptation of second generation children” (p. 225). García Coll and Szalacha (2004) also stressed the role of social support in mental well-being of young immigrants. They noted that fellow immigrants in communities where young newcomers settle in are supportive of their emotional adjustment and help them maintain positive aspirations by playing a role in preservation of cultural values, reinforcing parental authority, and serving as a buffer against often hostile mainstream society.

### ***SOCIOLOGICAL STUDIES ON ADOLESCENT IMMIGRANTS' ADAPTATION***

A number of studies conducted from the sociological perspective examined the effects of structural conditions in the host society on the adaptational outcomes among young immigrants. It has been argued that the



emerging hourglass economy, economic restructuring, decreasing opportunities for welfare assistance, persistence of racial discrimination, concentration of poverty in inner-city ghettos, consolidation of drug use and street gangs as alternative lifestyles in American cities, drastic increase in the proportion of children in one-parent families, and growth of "oppositional culture" among young Americans negatively affect opportunities for their social mobility (Hirschman, 2001; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001, 2006; Zhou, 1997a, 1999). On the other hand, immigrant children could utilize their ethnic minority group membership and traditional cultural patterns as distinct sources of social capital that can provide them with adaptive advantages (Zhou & Bankston, 1994).

Studies have also examined how various aspects of social class, place of birth, racial and ethnic background, residential and school location, family and intergenerational relations, community support, adherence to traditional values, and language skills, affected the process of adaptation, measured by educational attainment, among immigrant youth (Pong & Hao, 2007; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Zhou, 1997a). For instance research has shown that neighborhood and school characteristics influenced educational performance of immigrant children more than that of the native children, and that they were partly responsible for the disadvantage of Mexican children and for the advantage of the Filipino youth (Pong & Hao). In another study, Van Hook and Stamper Balistreri (2002) showed that Spanish-speaking LEP (low English proficiency) children attended schools with other low-income, minority, and non-English-speaking students more often than did the children of other immigrant groups. Moreover, the proportion of Spanish-speaking LEP children who attended such schools significantly increased between 1985 and 2000. The authors suggested that these results are important because they "demonstrate how the institutional context within which immigrant children adjust to life in the United States is substantially different (and more impoverished) for Hispanic Spanish-speaking students than it is for other ethnic-origin and linguistic groups and that it has been growing worse over time" (p. 650). This trend of increasing linguistic isolation and concentration of non-English-speaking students in high-poverty schools may negatively affect the incorporation of immigrant youth.

Other studies have suggested that regardless of ethnic origin, foreign-born youth enjoys higher rates of school success than second generation young immigrants. For instance, Padilla and Gonzalez (2001) found that Mexican immigrant children performed better in school than their U.S.-born counterparts. Higher grades were also found among those students

who received prior schooling in Mexico and who had a history of enrollment in ESL education after immigration. In a related study, White and Glick (2000) showed that despite their lower levels of human capital, recent immigrants who arrived to the U.S. as adolescents were more likely than those born in the U.S. to remain in high school. The authors cited access to familial social capital and attitudinal measures as reasons for this finding. Although Dinovitzer, Hagan, and Parker's (2003) study did not provide confirmation that foreign-born youth has higher educational attainment than second generation immigrants, they showed that bilingual first generation immigrants enjoyed a greater likelihood of attending university than their U.S.-born counterparts. Moreover, they found that for all students, social capital variables (relational ties to parents) and planful competence (characterized by self confidence, dependability, and intellectual investment) predicted higher educational attainment.

Many studies have also examined the causes of the exceptional school success among some, mostly Asian, immigrant children (e.g., Chinese, Punjabi, Cambodian, Vietnamese, Japanese, and Hmong), often despite their lower socio-economic status and disadvantageous school location (Caplan, Choy, & Whitmore, 1989, 1991; Feliciano, 2005; Gibson, 1989; Matute-Bianchi, 1986; Ogbu, 1989; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Zhou & Bankston, 1994). They attributed school successes among some of the immigrants to inequalities in relative pre-migration educational attainments, strong influence of family and community, cultural values that emphasize education as means to mobility, belief in diligence, persistence, and hard work, and to parental pressures put on children to work hard, study, be obedient, and avoid excessive Americanization. Moreover, and interestingly, Matute-Bianchi's study attributed high educational success among Japanese Americans to positive stereotypes of this minority group among American teachers. Studies have also shown that immigrant children who had strong cultural identity, who were from intact families with high rates of support from kin and local ethnic community, and those whose families reinforced values of hard work tended to do better at school and have higher educational aspirations than other immigrant and native-born Anglo-American youth (Portes, 1995; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Rumbaut 1994, 1996; Zhou, 1997a; Zhou & Bankston, 1994).

Conversely, high educational non-enrollment and lower educational success among Chicanos and some Mexican, Salvadoran, and Guatemalan teenagers have been attributed to socio-economic pressures, language barrier, negative group image at school, substandard educational facilities, lack of knowledge among teachers of their cultural or linguistic backgrounds,



poorly educated or absent parents, and inner-city residence (Fry, 2003; Hirschman, 2001; López, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001; Matute-Bianchi, 1986; Ream, 2003). Interestingly, and contrary to the conventional literature that posits that some, and especially Asian immigrant children are successful in American schools because they come from families with "close, emotionally intense, bounded networks" (Banskton, 2004, p. 177), Ream observed that social capital derived from strong Mexican American familism may actually contribute to the underachievement of Mexican students. He and others (Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbush, 1995) argued that language and cultural barriers prohibit immigrant students from seeking help of well-informed school personnel, while strong family ties make them overly rely on often incorrect advice of their family members.

Ream (2003), as well as Branz-Spall, Rosenthal, and Wright (2003) also brought to attention the negative role of Mexican immigrant students' mobility in their educational achievement. Frequent mobility was found to cause difficulties because of days lost while moving between schools, lack of consistency in the curriculum, and disrupted social networks among students. At a particular disadvantage were children of agricultural migrant workers, who had to work to supplement family incomes and whose frequent moves disrupted their educational process and led to lower academic achievement, higher dropout rates, and other school-related problems (López et al., 2001).

There were two additional factors that seemed to contribute to the school underachievement of Mexican youth. The first was related to the lack of parental involvement in the schooling process due to overwork, language barrier, and frustration with the system that does not understand their cultural values and beliefs (López et al., 2001). The second one was pointed out by Portes and Hao (2004) who, consistently with other literature on the subject, observed that Mexican students suffered from lower achievement levels and displayed higher propensity to drop out of school. This propensity became greater in high-SES schools suggesting that "dropping out represents a 'solution' for students who confront more competitive school environments where the handicaps associated with their own backgrounds become highly visible, subjecting them to greater discrimination by others" (p. 11926). Interestingly, the presence of a greater number of co-ethnics in school acted as a leveling factor and attenuated the negative effects of students' ethnic background. In other words, Mexican students did better in more congenial and less competitive environment created by peers from the same ethnic group. Portes' and Hao's results were

confirmed by Goldsmith (2004), who found that Latinos were more optimistic about their future education and had more positive attitudes about their teachers and classes in segregated-minority schools, especially if schools also employed many minority teachers. These differences in beliefs reduced the Latino-White achievement gaps. Positive effects of association with other members of the ethnic group seem to carry over into the college environment. As Barajas and Pierce (2001) have found, young Latina college students who had supportive relationships with other Latinas and who emphasized their ethnic group membership had positive self definitions and, thus, were more resilient to negative ethnic stereotypes.

Mexicans were not the only immigrant group whose lower educational success researchers have tried to explain. For instance, Yang (2004) attributed school underachievement of Southeast Asian American children to troubles they had communicating with their parents and to their joined problems in communicating with the school personnel. Many of the parents who faced language barrier, who were unfamiliar with the functioning of and opportunities offered by the American educational system, and who themselves received very little formal education had limited impact on their children's schooling.

Immigrant youths' adaptations have also seemed to be negatively affected by migration that disrupts traditional parent-child relationships and leads to conflict. According to Zhou (1997a), Rumbaut (1994), and Waters (1996), sources of conflict include long-term family separation, loss of parental authority, and decreased family interactions due to overwork among parents. The authors have also documented fears among immigrant parents that their children will become "Americanized" too fast and lose their traditional way of life, and among children that they will not become "American" fast enough to win their peers' approval due to their parents holding them back. Moreover, as Young (2004) and Espiritu (2001) pointed out, many Asian families are struggling with conflicts brought about by the children's desire to follow American ideas that give them the right to decide for themselves about their future and their parents' traditional views on the role of children as subjugated to the authority of the elders and as the future caregivers of the older generation.

Acquisition of English language among immigrant youth as a prerequisite for their successful adaptation has also garnered interest among researchers. On the one side of the debate were those who have argued that bilingualism causes academic failure, mental confusion among children and adolescents and, thus, inhibits their adaptation in a predominantly English speaking society (Baker & de Kanter, 1981). Most of the



empirical evidence, however, showed that cognitive abilities, scholastic achievement, and self esteem were positively affected by bilingualism (Banskton & Zhou, 1995; Fernandez & Nielsen, 1986; Golash-Boza, 2005; Matute-Bianchi, 1986; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001, 2006). It has been argued that proficiency in the ethnic language ties students to their tradition, families, and communities that stress academic achievement and provide emotional and normative support to immigrant youth (Zhou, 1997a). Moreover, proficiency in the host language (English) can strengthen youth's attachment to and role in the adaptation of their families. Children of immigrants often serve as translators or "language brokers" (Tse, 1996) who help their parents in many important life domains such as health care, education, legal issues, finances, employments, and housing (Orellana, Dorner, & Pulido, 2003).

### ***THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS USED TO MODEL IMMIGRANTS' ADAPTATION***

The adaptation prospects of young immigrants have been the subject of continued debate in the fields of sociology and ethnic studies. The assimilation perspective has dominated much of the scholarship on the subject for the most part of the twentieth century. As early as in 1921, Park and Burges defined assimilation as a "Process of interpretation and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of other persons or groups, and, by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them in a common cultural life" (quoted in Gordon, 1964, p. 62). According to this view, immigrants' successful adaptation was dependent on their ability to shed their previous cultural patterns, including their ethnic identification, distinctive ethnic traits, religion, and language, and embrace cultural norms of the host society (Zhou & Bankston, 1994). The model predicted that the new immigrants and their descendants would advance up the socio-economic ladder and eventually would become absorbed into the mainstream of American society (Hirschman, 2001). Park (1928), Warner and Srole (1945), and Gordon (1964) were the most influential proponents of this approach.

Over the last four decades, however, several anomalies in the straight-line assimilationist approach have been noted and the applicability of the traditional perspective has often been contested (Alba & Nee, 1997; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001, 2006; Zhou, 1997b; Zhou & Xiong, 2005). For example, in 1992 Gans observed the existence of a process among the

second generation adolescents; he termed "the second generation decline." He claimed that due to their reluctance to work for the wages prevailing among immigrants and under the work conditions their parents had to endure, combined with the scarcity of job opportunities and the lack of skills, large numbers of immigrant children from less fortunate socio-economic backgrounds could be trapped in a state of permanent poverty. Gans predicted that as a result of their impoverished status and, at the same time, rising aspirations, second generation teenagers might become involved in crime, alcoholism, drug abuse, and other forms of pathological behavior. Such trends of downward assimilation caused by frustrations and disappointments with the system that was holding them down in the lower echelons of the socio-economic hierarchy were reported among Dominican and Haitian youth by Pessar (1987) and Waters (1996). Anomalies such as the second generation decline, or as Perlmann and Waldinger (1997) termed it, "second generation revolt," lead to heated theoretical debates and development of alternative theoretical frameworks that modeled how immigrants adapt to American society and factors that affect this process (Zhou, 1997b).

Multiculturalists, for example, put the ethnic cultural attributes and pre-immigration experiences of the newcomers at the center of attention. Such traditional attributes were not to be seen as inferior to the traits of the American mainstream and they were not expected to be shed with the increasing length of stay in the U.S. or in subsequent generations (Glazer & Moynihan, 1970; Zhou, 1997b). Conversely, they were expected to interact with the traits of the host society and be reconstructed and reinvented in the process (Conzen, Gerber, Morawska, Pozzetta, & Vecoli, 1992). Moreover, scholars who subscribed to such an approach rejected the notion that there is a unified Anglo core of American society and instead argued that American society is composed of a dominant group of Euro-Americans and a collection of ethnic and racial minority groups (Zhou, 1997b).

The structural perspective, another departure from the straight-line assimilationist framework, helped to explain differences in social adaptation of minority groups "in terms of advantages and disadvantages inherent to social structures rather than in the process of acculturation or selective Americanization" (Zhou, 1997a, p. 74). As Zhou argued, "on the issue of immigrant adaptation this perspective maintains that the process of becoming American may not lead uniformly to middle-class status, but rather to the occupation of different rungs on the ethnic hierarchy" (p. 74). Immigrants were to be constrained by the ethnic hierarchy that imposes limits



on their access to social resources, including education, quality jobs, and housing (Zhou, 1997b).

Waters (1994) and Portes and Zhou (1993) acknowledged the heterogeneous nature of most ethnic groups and the significant variability in the adaptation paths followed by young newcomers. They suggested that immigrants settling in the United States may follow at least three different routes when it comes to their adaptation. They can assimilate to the culture of the mainstream American society, they can adopt the values of the "American underclass," or they can further their social and economic advancement by preserving their heritage and ties to other ethnic community members. The paths followed by young immigrants were to depend on contextual factors such as presence or absence of discrimination and/or strong receiving co-ethnic community and location in relation to inner-city areas (Rumbaut, 1994). Portes and Zhou's thesis was subsequently elaborated on and tested by Zhou (1997b), Hirschman (2001), Zhou and Xiong (2005), and Stodolska and Alexandris (2004). In their analysis of Gibson's (1989) study, Portes and Zhou also acknowledged the possibility of another form of adaptation, namely selective assimilation. They suggested that for Punjabi adolescents who were encouraged by their parents to obtain full proficiency in English, but at the same time were prevented from becoming "too Americanized," slow paced, selective assimilation to the culture of the mainstream White society may have proven the preferred course of action.

In the last several years, a number of researchers have called for a return to, albeit in a changed form, or for the re-contextualizing of the assimilation theory (Alba & Nee, 2003; Nagel, 2002). Nagel, for instance, criticized the recent widespread attention to the concept of transnationalism. She suggested that the assumption that immigrants are not assimilating and that they remain tied to their homelands requires significant scrutiny. She argued that the transnational approach underestimates the powers that host societies exert on immigrants and the desire among many immigrants to be included as part of the 'mainstream.' She conceded the "many critiques that have been leveled against assimilation theory" (p. 981), but argued that "the concept of assimilation remains pertinent to our analyses of immigration politics and the politics of immigrants" (p. 981).

In 2003, Alba and Nee developed a new theory of assimilation in which they argued that "institutional changes, from civil rights legislation to immigration law, combined with individualistic incentives and motivation, have profoundly reshaped the context of immigrant reception, making it more favorable for the assimilation of newcomers and their children than in the past" (Zhou & Xiong, 2005, p. 1121). Alba and Nee suggested that

all individuals would eventually assimilate, but not necessarily in a single direction as proposed by the classical theory. In fact, similarly to members of the mainstream, they may pursue upward, downward, or horizontal mobility. American mainstream to which immigrants were to assimilate consisted of not only the White middle class, but also of members of ethnic and racial groups and the central-city poor. The process of assimilation was to vary between individuals and between groups, and depend on a set of proximate causes such as forms of capital, social networks, and purposive action, and distal causes that are embedded in larger social structures (Zhou & Xiong, 2005).

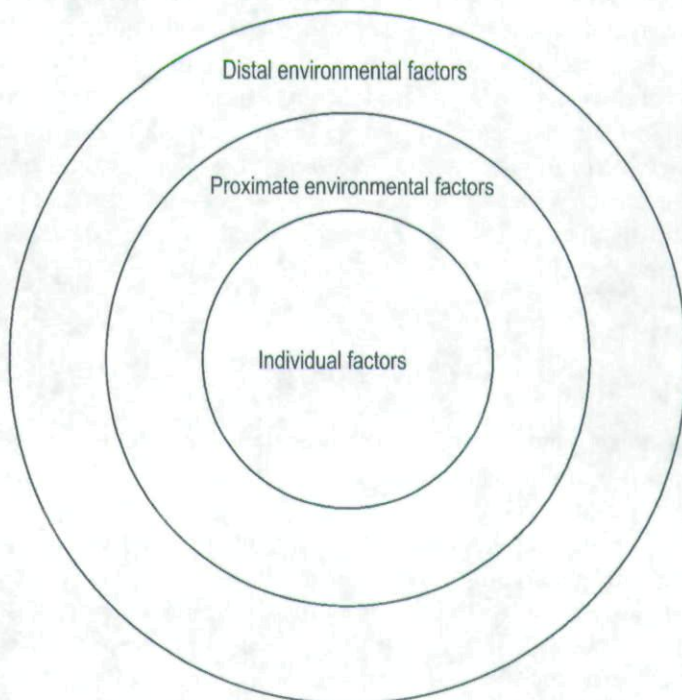
## CONCLUSIONS

The issue of young immigrants' adaptation has been tackled by researchers representing a broad range of disciplines, including psychology, psychiatry, social-psychology, sociology, ethnic and migration studies, geography, education, and demography. The approaches to the topic of immigrant youths' adaptation are a testimony to the authors' disciplinary affiliations, as well as to the trends in the disciplines they represented at the particular point in time when their manuscripts were written. Moreover, they mirror broader sentiments in American society and the salient topics of discussion at any given time. For example, papers written and theories developed early in the twentieth century resonated contemporary rhetoric of immigrants' lack of adaptability potential and mental deficiencies (Nagel, 2002; Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). Toward the end of the twentieth century, however, the opinions regarding young immigrants' adaptation became more liberal and attention shifted toward virtues of multiculturalism, transnational connections, and the beneficial effects of ethnic traits' retention on immigrants' mental, social, and economic well-being.

It would be an impossible task to provide a complete and comprehensive review of the almost century-long research on young immigrants' adaptation in a short manuscript such as this. Thus, a conscious decision was made to focus on more contemporary studies from three main disciplinary approaches (psychology, social-psychology, and sociology), while giving cursory attention to research published in the 1970s and 1980s, and to classical theoretical models from early and mid twentieth century. Regardless of the disciplinary approach used to examine factors affecting adaptation of young immigrants, based on the literature reviewed in this paper, they can be broadly divided into three categories, from the most proximal to



FIGURE 1. Factors Affecting Adaptation of Young Immigrants



the most distal (see Figure 1). The first group, called *individual factors* encompasses personal characteristics of immigrants such as their age, gender, ethnic/racial background, age at immigration, generational status, length of time spent in the host country, personality traits, level of education obtained in the home country, history of enrollment in ESL classes in the host country, proficiency in the language of the host country and in the language of the home country (bilingualism), religiosity, attitudes toward schooling, number of school transfers and, related to that, geographic mobility, and adherence to traditional cultural values.

The second group encompasses *proximate environmental factors* that are related to young immigrants' families, schools they attend, peer groups, ethnic communities, and neighborhoods they live in. Characteristics of their families include their socio-economic background (including educational level and household income), number of siblings, level of support provided to children, including support in school-related matters, attitudes toward children's education, presence of both parents in the household,

their proficiency in the language of the host country, whether or not children were separated from their parents and, if so, the duration of separation, and presence and the degree of parent-child conflict. Factors related to the schools children attend include their SES, ethnic composition, presence of other students of the same ethnic background, attitudes of teachers and staff, familiarity of teachers with cultural and linguistic background of students, availability of ESL classes, school's location, and resources at the school's disposal. Peer networks of immigrant children can also play a role as proximate environmental factors. They are related to ethnic background of young immigrants' peers, including presence of supportive members of the same ethnic group, and their attitudes (including presence or absence of discrimination). Ethnic communities at the place of settlement, including their size, resources, relations with the mainstream, and the extent of support they can provide to immigrants are also critical factors in young people's adaptation. Lastly, characteristics of neighborhoods in which immigrants settle, including their SES and factors such as crime rate are likely to play a role.

The third group of factors conditioning adaptation of children and adolescent immigrants can be described as *distal environmental factors*. They include broader societal structures that affect children's lives (e.g., educational or health care systems), attitudes on the part of the mainstream society, economic opportunities that await them after graduation, and legal system of the host country or the state where they settle, just to name a few.

It is unlikely that this classification includes all of the issues that were examined in the already extensive literature on the subject, but may provide an easy and convenient framework to group factors that condition the adaptation of young immigrants. This line of research is likely to flourish in the future, considering the ever-increasing numbers of newcomers settling in the United States and constant diversification of the countries of origin of new immigrants. Moreover, high fertility rates among immigrants will lead to a sustained growth in the population of second generation ethnics, whose adaptation to life in the United States will need to be examined.

Such examinations can have some important policy implications. Detailed suggestions for policies aimed at improving the welfare of immigrant children and fostering their positive adaptation are beyond the scope of this paper and have been extensively examined elsewhere (see Board on Children and Families, 1995; Greenberg et al., 2004; Shields & Behrman, 2004). The general suggestions that might be provided based on these examinations include addressing challenges faced by immigrant families such as poverty, lack of education, limited job opportunities, and lack



of English language fluency, and improving children's education prospects and access to health care services. In particular, studies show that programs and supports that increase employment prospects and incomes of parents have positive effect on their children's well-being (Shields & Behrman, 2004). However, in recent years access to many federal public assistance programs that could improve parents' employment status have been restricted, while the utilization of other services have fallen as many parents lack knowledge about their eligibility, face the language barrier, and fear adverse immigration consequences. Other efforts have sought to limit immigrants' (and undocumented immigrants' in particular) access to many public services (e.g., California's Proposition 187) (Board on Children and Families, 1995). As Greenberg et al. (2004) have argued, federal and state policy must shift away from restricting assistance to immigrant families and, instead, acknowledge the need to provide family supports to "help ensure that children of immigrants thrive and that their parents can progress in the labor force" (p. 144). Efforts also need to be made to improve participation in public assistance programs among eligible families. For instance, social service agencies should employ more bilingual staff and work with immigrant organizations to improve access to public assistance services (Shields & Behrman, 2004). Schools should foster development of parent support groups to enable parents with limited English skills to understand the requirements for their children and to promote communication with teachers and other school personnel. Lastly, federal, state, and local education agencies, as well as immigrant community groups, should promote family literacy programs, encourage students' bilingualism, and retention of traditional cultural values and heritage (Shields & Behrman, 2004).

Access to health care services among immigrants and their children is also an important policy issue that will need to be addressed as it is critical in promoting mental and physical well-being of the newcomers and their ability to adapt to life in the United States (Greenberg et al., 2004). At the present time, the eligibility of immigrant children and their families to receive health care services depends on their immigration status and is severely limited for those residing in the U.S. illegally. Concerns over the cost have led to efforts to restrict access to those services among undocumented immigrants in California and several other states. Proponents of providing health care services to all immigrants argue that such restrictions would cause an undue stress on emergency medical services, while denying children of immigrants' access to preventive health care and immunizations can have long-term negative effects on the health of the nation (Greenberg et al., 2004). Similarly as with health care, concerns

over the cost and strained federal, state, and local resources have led to a heated debate over the provision of public education services to children of immigrants. In fact, education is one of the largest expenditures associated with immigration (Board on Children and Families, 1995). This includes, among others, cost of training teachers and developing instructional materials and bilingual assessment tools for immigrant children. Failure to invest in immigrant children's education, however, will place a financial burden on society when these children enter adulthood and when their incomes and tax contributions will be lower than what they might have been if appropriate investments had been made in their education earlier in life (Board on Children and Families, 1995). Policy issues related to young immigrant's education, health care, and the labor prospects of their parents are unlikely to be successfully addressed if broader issues around immigration policy and the status of undocumented workers remain unresolved (Greenberg et al., 2004).

While the existing research in the area of young immigrants' adaptation has been effective at examining factors related to their socio-economic situation, regional location, and cultural backgrounds, it would be desirable if future studies focused more attention on four other areas of inquiry. First, more cross-national investigations of young immigrants' adaptation should be undertaken to elucidate the important role of country-specific modes of incorporation (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006) in their adaptation process. Second, more longitudinal research should be conducted that would follow the trajectories of young immigrants from the time of their settlement through different stages of their immigration process. Such research would be particularly beneficial as it would help to determine the role of certain factors conditioning post-immigration experiences of the youth (e.g., school situation, residential location, family and peer relations) on their future socio-economic success and mental well-being. Third, the role of pre-immigration experiences of young newcomers, and their family and cultural backgrounds in particular, should be taken into account in future studies. Lastly, researchers should pay more attention to separating generational cohorts of young immigrants, so the factors conditioning post-settlement adaptation of the youth could be distinguished from those that affect the adaptation of second generation young ethnics.

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