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Integration of Low-Skilled Immigrants to the United-States and Work-Family Balance

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Abstract

The role played by immigrants in the American economy is well documented and, to a lesser extent, the effect of the migration experience on the families of immigrants. However, little is known of the connections between work and family when it comes to immigrants, especially immigrants in low-skilled jobs, whether it is the effect of labour market experiences on the family or the effect of family patterns on integration into the labour market. Yet, the issue of balancing personal life with professional responsibilities is of growing interest among scholars and policy makers, given the increasing participation of women in the labour market, the increase in non-standard work and the high proportion of immigrants in these work arrangements.

Introduction

In this paper, I link the integration of immigrants to the United-States with the possible impacts of that integration on the work-family balance of immigrants. The objective is to assess the integration of low-skilled immigrants using four

indicators of integration, to review the literature on work-family balance, and to suggest negative, and possibly some positive impacts of integration on the work-family balance of immigrants. I will focus more specifically on the work-family balance of low-skilled immigrants, given their high share among the immigrant population and because, as we shall see, they are more likely to have work conditions that can add conflict to their balance between their work and family spheres. This paper is part of my postdoctoral work on the work-family balance of low-skilled migrants in Canada and the United States.

1 –Immigrants to the United States

There is a very large literature on the economic position of immigrants. Much of the literature is concerned with the problems confronted by poorly educated immigrants, especially Latino immigrants. They represent 40% of all immigrants to the U.S. (Pew Hispanic Center 2009), and are characterized by high fertility, low educational attainment, and a significant proportion of unauthorized immigrants. Immigrants earn less than the native-born, and are overrepresented in low-skilled jobs (Card 2001).

The United States is seen as traditional countries of immigration as it encourages immigration for permanent settlement. It has the largest number of immigrants than any other country in the world, more than 40 million in 2010, representing 12% of the American population. Almost 30% of immigrants in 2010 were from Mexico. Over half of immigrants were from the Americas, and one fourth from Asia. Only 16% are from Europe. Immigrants to the United-States are characterized by a high share of low-skilled workers and of undocumented aliens

(The Congress of the United States, 2005). In 2007, one in three immigrants was undocumented (Camarota, 2007). Immigrants have typically settled in California, Texas, Florida, Illinois and New York. Another feature of new immigrants is that they now also settle in the Midwest and South, in states that previously had little immigration (Jiménez, 2011).

Those figures are in part the consequence of the change in American immigration policies. In 1965, following the Immigration and Nationality Act, the country stopped selecting newcomers based on their country of origin. Before then, it ran a quota system where immigration from Asia was limited and that of Europe was favored. Now, immigrants come from Latin America, Asia and elsewhere in the developing world (Gerber, 2011). Many of them come in under the Family Preference system; between 2000 and 2007, 5.2 out of the 8.1 millions of legal immigrants. There is also a large undocumented immigrant population (about 20 million between 2000 and 2007) (Borjas, 2009).

2 – Indicators of Immigrant Integration

Jiménez (2011) reminds us that integration, unlike assimilation, is the process by which immigrants and the host society adapt to one another. Integration is also when differences among members of a society are seen as minimal. There are many aspects of integration. For one, access to the labor market is crucial for the integration of immigrants into their new community. For the newcomer, finding work is one of the first needs to be met and often represents recognition of their integration by the host society. Scholars have looked at many other indicators of a successful integration into the host society

(Jiménez, 2011; Duncan and Trejo, 2011; Myers and Pitkin, 2011), sometimes developed integration or assimilation indexes (Park and Myers, 2010; Vigdor, 2008). This section highlights the current state of low-skilled immigrant integration over four main indicators: labor market integration, education, English proficiency, and political integration.

First, compared to other immigrant-receiving countries, immigrants to the United States experience low unemployment, but they are also more likely to be found in low-wage jobs and low-status occupations (Terrazas, 2011). Looking at all immigrants, regardless of skill levels, the employment rate is excellent (93% among men aged 25 to 59 in 2005, 2006 and 2007). Similarly, the employment rate of U.S. born men is at 90%. Among the high school dropouts, the employment rate of adult immigrants exceeds that of the U.S. born (92% versus 72%) (Duncan and Trejo, 2011). These data support the argument made by many scholars who see the increasing numbers of low-skilled immigrants as increased competition for U.S. born low-skilled workers, and as one of the costs of the new immigrants to the country (Holzer, 2011). The employment advantage of adult immigrants disappears at higher education levels.

The performance of immigrants on the labor market is also measured by what they earn. On average, employed adult immigrants earn about 20% less than their U.S. born counterparts. The earning gap varies according to the length of stay of immigrants, the gap being larger between recent immigrants and the U.S. born population. During the first two years after arrival, recent immigrants earn about 30% less than U.S. born employed men. Even after 20 years in the

country, there is still a gap (8% among high school dropouts and 13% among those with at least 12 years of schooling) between immigrants and U.S. born men (Duncan and Trejo, 2011).

Second, education is also a major indicator of immigrant integration, that is, the extent to which foreign-born men and women attain the same level of education as the native-born. Using data from the American Community Survey of 2005, 2006 and 2007, and studying men aged 25 to 59, Duncan and Trejo (2011) found that Hispanics have the lowest average schooling level: 9.7 years for adult Hispanic immigrants and 12.6 years for U.S. born Hispanics. This being said, some immigrant groups are highly educated, sometimes more than the native-born. The best example comes from the Asian adult immigrants, who have on average 14.5 years of education, and 14.8 years among the U.S. born Asians. When we combine all ethnic groups, adult immigrants are, on average, less educated than U.S. born adults (11.8 years, compared with 13.5 years). Men with less than 9 years of schooling represent 21% of adult immigrants versus 2% of U.S. born men.

Third, English proficiency is often seen as an important component of national identity (Jiménez, 2011). It is associated with education levels in the country of origin. Two-third of adult immigrant men with less than a high school diploma reported the lowest category of English proficiency. Adult immigrants with at least a high school diploma defined their English ability as well or very well (Duncan and Trejo, 2011). Over two-third of immigrants from Latin American have a limited knowledge of English, followed by immigrants from Asia (47%)

and Europe (30%) (Jiménez, 2011). Immigrants from Latin America have more opportunities to speak Spanish, given their high representation among the immigrant population, which may explain their low levels of English proficiency (Jiménez, 2011).

Forth, formal political integration of immigrants includes three dimensions: legal status, naturalization and citizenship, and voting and voter registration. The legal status (whether immigrants are documented or not) is an important determinant of one's integration. It affects other indicators, such as other aspects of immigrants' political integration, as well as employment and education. In 2008, about 31% of the 38 million of foreign-born were undocumented, either because they entered the United States without inspection or because they remained in the country while their visa expired. Mexico is the largest source country of unauthorized immigrants (55%) (Jiménez, 2011). The number and the rate of naturalization have increased over time, from about 205,000 in 1980 to more than a million in 2008. There is an important difference between the first and second generation of immigrants regarding citizenship, mainly due to the 14th amendment to the constitution in 1868 that grant citizenship to all persons born on U.S. territory. The third dimension of political integration, voting and voter registration, indicates that naturalized immigrants are less likely to vote than U.S. born voters.

Jiménez (2011) argue that, despite the lack of integration policies, immigrants' integration is "happening organically", but not evenly. Jiménez and Myers and Pitkin (2011) agree that new immigrants today are as successful

when it comes to integrating the host society, compared with previous cohorts of immigrants.

3 – Impact of integration on the work-family balance of low-skilled migrants

There is a relevant literature on the impact of the migration experience on the family, in relation to work. The male breadwinner model, which puts an emphasis on the household as the woman's sphere and the workplace as the man's sphere, no longer defines how most families divide labour between men and women (Crompton 2006). Hispanic immigrants seem to adhere to the traditional gender-role attitudes and behaviours (Harris & Firestone 1998). The availability of close kin helps maintain traditional family life, whereas the absence of close kin, such as older relatives to look after children and do housework, may result in a non-traditional labour division between husbands and wives (Foner 1997). For immigrant Mexican men, marriage is often delayed as a result of migration (Parrado 2004).

There is also an emerging literature on work-family or work-life balance. When the demands from a domain of life become incompatible with the demands of another domain, conflict occurs (Hochschild 1997; Hammer & Thompson 2003). Because of the major recent transformations in the family and the workplace, the loss of balance between the demands from the workplace and the demands from the family has become problematic. Early research on the work-family balance has studied the interconnectedness of the two spheres (Campbell

Clark 2000). As such, the spillover theory (Champoux 1978; Staines 1980) states that emotions and behaviours are carried out between one domain to another. For example, a bad day at work is likely to be carried as a bad mood at home. Similarly, the compensation theory (Champoux 1978; Staines, 1980) states that there is an inverse relationship between the investments people put in each domain so that an unsatisfying experience in one domain will result in more investment in the other. For example, an unsatisfying family life will result in investment in the work sphere.

Leading scholars in the field have grouped current research into three constructs: conflict, enrichment and balance (Grzywacz & Carlson 2007; Maertz & Boyar 2010; McMillan, Morris, & Atchley 2011). Most of the literature on work-family balance deals with conflict. Social scientists have found an association between nonstandard work schedule and the odds of separation or divorce (Presser 2003; Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Wethington 1989), weaker parent-child interaction (Presser 2003), less involvement in housework (Aldous, Mulligan, & Bjarnason 1998), and overall decrease in the quality of life (Rice, Frone, & McFarlin 1992). Recent research has focussed on the positive side of the work-life connection. Enrichment is when an experience in one sphere positively impact on the other sphere. It can take two paths: “the instrumental path, where resources gains in one role directly increase performance in the other role, and the affect path, where gains in one role indirectly increase performance in the other role due to overall improvements in the individual’s positive affect (Carlson et al. 2006, in McMillan, Morris, & Atchley 2011:11)”. The

third construct, work-family balance, is also an emerging area of research. Human resource development scholars have proposed various definitions of work-family balance that were either based on role balance theory (Marks and MacDermind 1996), person-environment fit theory (Greenhaus and Parasuraman 1999; Voydanoff 2005), as an “absence of conflict” (Frone 2003), or as related to life satisfaction (Greenhaus and Allen 2006).

Most of the existent literature on the work-family balance focuses on Whites from North American and European countries (Spector et al. 2004), and educated professionals (Lambert 1999). The literature on the work family balance of immigrants is slim. For example, Grzywacz and colleagues (2007) found little work-family conflict among the immigrant Latinos employed in the poultry processing industry, whereas in a previous study (2005), they found that Mexican immigrants who came to the U.S. for work experienced substantial stress, anxiety and depression due to their separation from family and community.

Strategies to balance work and family life are available mainly to middle-class workers. Solutions offered by the employers may include flexible working hours, compressed four-day working weeks, and “time banking”. Parents may choose to engage in what Becker and Moen (1999) call “scaling back”, that is reducing and restructuring their commitment to paid work. They may, for example, reduce working hours, leave the workforce, and turn down jobs requiring more travel or relocation. It is usually the mother who scales back when children are of preschool age, sometimes until they leave home. Purchasing household services for house cleaning and childrearing is another useful strategy

for middle-class, dual-earner families (Stuenkel 2005).

In the context of increasingly precarious employment, their particular demographic situation, and the challenges each pose for the balance between work and family life, how do immigrants in low-skilled jobs manage? If immigrants are more likely to work in nonstandard work arrangements, what is the impact on their family lives? If immigrant men are more likely to delay marriage (and therefore childrearing), how does this affect their choices when searching for employment?

As a conclusion, I will suggest that immigrants in low-skilled jobs experience great work-to-family conflict, but they may also experience some work-to-family enrichment. Because the population under study are low-skilled workers, it is expected that bad working conditions such as working long hours, irregular schedules, and shift work, negatively affect workers' family life. However, there may also be work-to-family enrichment. Carlson and colleagues (2006) identify four types of gains: a) developmental (e.g. acquisition of knowledge), b) affective (e.g. changes in behaviour), c) capital (e.g. acquisition of assets), and d) efficiency. For immigrants, working, even in low-skilled jobs, benefits their families. Bringing money to the family is an obvious enrichment, but I argue that the acquisition of knowledge, such as language skills, also positively affects their family life and their personal life in general. Another possible enrichment is affective; by working with people from the host society (from their own ethnic community or not), they learn the values and the ways things are done in the host society, which may prove valuable for their families, and the integration of

the family into the host society.

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