

Finding Community: Immigrant and Native-Born Mothers' Perceptions of Support Networks

Extended Abstract

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The growing immigrant population in the United States pushes us to pay additional attention to the life experiences of immigrants after migration. Friendship, kin networks and systems of support play a role in facilitating immigration and shaping individual experiences in new places of residence. Access to social networks can bring individuals opportunities in education, employment, and entrepreneurship, as well as providing emotional support. For example, much research supports the role of social capital in improving educational attainment among second generation immigrant children (Glick & White 2004; Portes 2004; Bankston & Zhou 2002; Bankston & Zhou 1998). Though research pays close attention to the association of social networks with these positive outcomes, less attention has been paid to the factors that affect the strength of social networks among immigrants. This paper considers major influences on the level of perceived social support among foreign- and native-born mothers in the United States.

While research suggests that foreign-born status is indicative of strong social networks, additional research suggests that other socio-demographic statuses and contextual factors also determine access to social networks and support. Little work has been done comparing perceptions of network support between foreign- and native-born individuals in the United States. In such a stratified society, characteristics other than nativity become more important. This paper tests whether nativity yields variations in perceptions of social support when considered net of race, gender, and class characteristics.

The results of this study do not imply that immigrant mothers lack strong perceptions of support, but rather that their confidence in networks is lower than that of native-born mothers. Much theoretical research around immigrant social networks incorporates ideas of economic adjustment, parental support of children, and the exchange of information. This study suggests that economic incorporation may be one of the most important factors in settlement, in addition to mothers' involvement in elementary-age children's education. The social, cultural context and structural barriers can leave foreign-born mothers at a slight disadvantage in perception of resources on which they can draw. However, the analysis in this paper supports research that foreign-born mothers maintain strong networks despite moving great distances. This analysis tests perceptions among mothers within the United States, and, overall, all mothers indicated high levels of perceived support.

Most importantly, these results support findings that “embeddedness” within social structures affects perceptions of support networks. Perceptions are not the result of only individual-level characteristics or even perceptions of community safety, but represent power and status in society. For mothers of elementary-age children, status as an immigrant and perceptions of social support are largely mediated by socioeconomic class, as measured by income, education, and language ability. The results from this study suggest that further research into the challenges and complications, in terms of individual well-being and perceptions, foreign-born mothers encounter as their children enter the formal educational system in the United States is warranted.

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