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Gender Roles and Settlement Activities Among Children and Their Immigrant Families

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This article explores how girls and boys facilitate the establishment of permanent settlement in Mexican immigrant households. Through analysis of 68 interviews, three primary roles are identified: (a) tutors, when children serve as translators and teachers for their parents and younger siblings; (b) advocates, when children intervene or mediate on behalf of their households during difficult transactions or situations; and (c) surrogate parents, when children undertake nanny or parentlike activities. In addition, it was found that girls participate more than boys in tasks that require detailed explanations or greater responsibility. Boys, despite their involvement in household activities, did not have the same responsibility roles as girls did. Finally, the eldest child, regardless of gender, often took the lead role in assisting and caring for younger siblings. These findings advance the understanding of the interaction of immigration, children, and gender in household settlement.

This article explores the gendered ways in which girls and boys facilitate the establishment of permanent settlement among Mexican immigrant households. Immigrant settlement is a complicated process involving different circumstances, social ties, strategies, and economic well-being. With a few exceptions (Alarcón, 1995; Chávez, 1992; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994), we know little with regard to familial or household activities that help immigrant families settle in a new country, city, or community. We know even less about the role that children undertake in this process. Focusing on the specific roles that boys and girls undertake in aiding their household settlement helps us understand the role of children in different settlement processes and, equally important, how gender interacts with immigration.

I divide this article into four sections. I first discuss the theoretical considerations related to immigrant settlement, children, and gender. I then briefly describe the research study and my sampling framework. The third section presents the findings of 68 in-depth interviews of adults and children on the role that

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their children or they as children undertook in assisting their families to settle. In the last section, I conclude by discussing the implications of my findings.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS: IMMIGRANT SETTLEMENT, CHILDREN, AND GENDER

Immigrant settlement can be understood in several different theoretical contexts. For example, time spent in the United States is an important factor in a series of studies (Chiswick, 1978; Massey, 1986; Massey, Alarcón, Durand, & González, 1987; Piore, 1979) that help us understand the progress of permanent settlement (assimilation) of immigrants in the United States. The framework is basic. After initial years of adjustment, struggle, bouts with discrimination, and other difficult situations of integrating into American institutions and norms, immigrants melt into the general population, becoming, for the most part, typical Americans. Of course, variations of this model exist that point to the complexity of assimilation processes, but this approach is nevertheless dependent on its overarching principle of time—that is, the longer one has been in the United States, the more American or assimilated one becomes.

Another important framework on immigrant settlement revolves around studies that analyze processes that encourage, facilitate, or even discourage settlement. Some of these processes include, for example, the role of social networks in procuring employment, housing, and other basic necessities for initial survival and future success in a new country (Alarcón, 1995; Chávez, 1992; Massey, 1986; Massey et. al., 1987). Similarly, the social context of a receiving neighborhood has become an important tool in trying to understand different or segmented assimilation outcomes among first-, one-point-five,¹ and second-generation immigrants (Portes, 1995, 1996; Zhou, 1997). Finally, gender and family formation, or familism, are important factors that help mediate settlement. More than merely comparing settlement outcomes between men and women, gender is treated as a foci (as opposed to an independent variable) from which different settlement strategies develop (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994). Likewise, family formation takes on added meaning in trying to determine, for example, the importance of familial ties and family formation in the decision to immigrate and in the relative success of settlement and strategies of incorporation (Alarcón, 1995; Chávez, 1992; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994).

Studies on Latino families take as their point of departure the notion that Latino families are highly familistic and routinely confronted by hardships stemming from immigration, poverty, and minority status (Ramirez & Arce, 1981; Vega, 1995). Within an immigrant context, Portes and Bach (1985) argue that theoretically driven comparative studies are necessary to grasp how differing Latino ethnic groups with similar family values are accommodating to local opportunity structures and social conditions. Most research on Latino families is centered on the role of families for socialization, distribution of resources,

preservation of cultural forms, and immigrant settlement on one hand and changing family life and gender-role patterns on the other (Vega, 1995).

Familism is important to my study insofar as it informs us of the interaction and social support patterns found in immigrant and Mexican-origin families. For example, Keefe (1984) shows that Latino familial behaviors include participation in relatively large kin networks, where high levels of visitation and exchange behaviors are practiced. In contrast, non-Hispanic Whites have fewer family contacts and are satisfied to maintain these at long distance. Mexican Americans show that they are more likely to use family as a resource for solving problems and are more likely to reside in a cluster of extended kin households, thereby facilitating familistic reciprocity behavior. Similarly, Mexican immigrants rely primarily on family members for emotional support and instrumental assistance (Golding & Burnam, 1990; Griffith & Villavicencio, 1985; Vega & Kolody, 1985). In part, this study contributes to this body of research by giving agency to children and showing how gender influences the important and real roles and activities undertaken by young people in assisting their immigrant households to settle.

MEXICAN IMMIGRANT SETTLEMENT

Mexican immigration to the United States has been occurring, at least in a technical sense, since the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed at the termination of the Mexican and American war in 1848, which among many things, created the state of California. Since then, several important waves have characterized immigration from Mexico to the United States. At least since World War II, migration of people from Mexico has occurred in unprecedented numbers. In part, the Bracero Program,² which began in 1942 and terminated in 1964, helps us understand the large number of Mexican immigrants who attempted to migrate to the United States after 1965 when Congress terminated the National Origins Act that until then severely restricted legal immigration from the Western Hemisphere. As a result of these and other factors, Mexican immigration to the United States has been immense. Los Angeles is second only to Mexico City in the number of Mexicans residing in this metropolitan region. California, our country's most populous state by at least 10 million residents, has the largest number of Mexican- and Latino-origin people, which accounts for well over 29% of the total (State of California, Department of Finance, 1998). As a result, immigration studies have produced at least two strands of research: The first strand looks specifically at issues of Mexican immigrant settlement, and the second consists of generation studies that analyze outcomes (e.g., education, employment, psychological, incorporation) and other processes of the children of Mexican and other immigrants.

As a point of departure, these two frameworks provide us with an important lens with which to understand the varied and complex processes of immigrant

settlement and eventual assimilation. But even these paradigms are lacking. Within this body of work, gender and children have only recently gained notable attention. The few studies on these topics explore, for example, gendered responses to and changes as a result of immigrating to the United States (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994) and the importance of social networks (Chávez, 1992; Massey et al., 1987) for women and other groups of migrants. These studies are important because they shed light on how to better understand gender as a category, but more important, gender is seen as a social practice that influences to a great degree different immigration processes and participation in activities that encourage settlement.

Research on first-generation immigrant children or second-generation children (children born in the United States to immigrant parents) has similarly garnered a modicum of attention. Most of the work in this area looks at assimilation and adaptation processes of school-age children (Gibson, 1988; Portes, 1996; Rumbaut, 1997; Zhou, 1997), educational outcomes (Olsen, 1988; Rumbaut, 1990, 1996; Rumbaut & Cornelius, 1995; Vernez & Abrahamse, 1996), and psychological determinants, motivations, and achievement patterns as a result of immigration status (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995). This last body of research does an exemplary job of exploring gender differences.

However, both of these two frameworks and their studies ignore children as actors in the day-to-day activities as well as in the more complex scenarios that immigrant households confront as families become settled and Americanized. For example, even though Chávez (1992) and Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994) analyze the processes of settlement and family formation, both ignore children's participation. Similarly, second-generation studies are preoccupied with exploring outcomes and processes that happen to children after immigration and settlement. As a result, they pay little attention to factors leading to the decision to immigrate and of course, the varied and complex activities that children undertake as active participants in the actual settlement process. How might children of Mexican origin undertake important roles and activities in assisting their immigrant parents and households to settle? In addition, how salient is gender in the allocation and carrying out of the various activities that assist settlement?

CHILDREN AND SETTLEMENT

To conceptualize the processes through which children become major actors in their households regarding settlement and other important household developments, I reflected on my own upbringing and engaged in classroom discussion on this topic in several immigration classes at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Born in the United States to immigrant parents from Mexico, my second-generation status allowed me to compare my household responsibilities and roles with those of first-generation immigrant students, many of whom enroll in my immigration classes. I was always impressed with

the number of different stories, activities, roles, and events that students discussed in my classroom regarding their participation in their families' settlement. My students believed, and rightfully so, that they were major players in their households, at least when it came to assisting their parents in specific settlement types of activities, such as translating, teaching, or caring for younger siblings. I wondered if the immigrant children of today serve in roles similar to those of their earlier cohorts who, for example, arrived in the United States before 1965 or during the mid- to late 1980s when the United States experienced unprecedented numbers of newcomers.

When an immigrant family arrives in the United States is important because it allows us to explore whether there might be differences in the degree to which children assist their households to settle based on the availability of local or regional institutional resources. To assist with their settlement, immigrants are able to use both community-based and familial/kin resources at much higher rates today than, for example, during the immediate post-World War II immigrant era in which immigration was not nearly as high as in the post-1965 era. Today, at least in Los Angeles and in other immigrant-rich cities, there exists a number of immigrant advocacy agencies, community-based organizations, bilingual education programs and sources of information, immigrant-sensitive elected officials, and of course, large immigrant communities, which makes initial settlement perhaps less reliant on children than in years past. As a result, I would argue that families who immigrated to the United States prior to 1965 relied on their children to a larger degree because of the fewer immigrant resources available to newcomer households in Los Angeles during that era. Here, I do not mean to suggest that immigration is an easy process in the 1990s but, rather, that the context of a receiving community is much different and perhaps allows for less reliance on children to perform complex tasks and interventions as parents and households maneuver through settlement.

I also wondered if there was something specific to Mexican immigrants that might account for children undertaking very specific and important roles and activities in assisting their immigrant parents and households settle. We know for example that many Mexican immigrants to the United States come from rural or agrarian backgrounds where the meaning of what it is to be a child is different from that of Mexicans from urban centers or even Mexicans living in Los Angeles. Viviana Zelizer (1985), in her classic study on the social value of children, teaches us about the transformation in the economic and sentimental value of children. Basically, she argues that children in postindustrial societies are in a strict sense economically "worthless" but emotionally "priceless." That is, Zelizer teaches us how, over time, the role that children undertake in their families has changed from "contributors" to "sentimental" objects of affection. The important roles that immigrant children of Mexican origin undertake in their households challenge Zelizer's notion that their contributions, even in a strict economic sense, are nil. My study shows that immigrant children and young

teenagers, in addition to contributing financially to their households, undertake other important activities that assist their families' settlement.

For example, in my study, I was able to identify three broad but nevertheless primary roles and a series of activities and actions that children undertake in helping their parents and siblings adjust to and settle in a new country. Some of these tasks include serving as translators or interpreters, as financial consultants, as teachers, as mediators, or in parentlike activities. Indeed, children are important actors in their household settlement, a process I clearly document later in this article.

GENDER AND CHILDREN'S ROLES

Barrie Thorne (1995) provides us with an excellent framework to understand how gender might interact with children's roles as they assist their immigrant households to settle in the United States. She does not look at children so much as individuals but rather in group situations with social relations, through the organization and meanings of social situations, and in the collective practices through which children and adults create and re-create gender in their daily interactions. In shifting the focus from individuals to social relations, Thorne moves away from the question, *Are boys and girls different?* Instead, she wants to explore how children actively come together to help create, and sometimes challenge, gender structures and meanings. Her logic is that children's collective activities should weigh more fully in understanding gender and social life. This framework helps me understand how gender might also interact in familial or group (brothers and sisters) settings in households engaged in day-to-day activities and other complex situations related to settlement. Perhaps more important, it helps me place children and gender at the center of immigrant settlement.

By undertaking a study that looks at how boys and girls assist their immigrant households to settle, I add to a growing body of literature related to immigration and gender while also contributing to an already burgeoning field of children and immigration. In this article, I challenge the notion that settlement can be adequately understood as only an adult process, one devoid of the younger members of an immigrant household. I also attempt to identify patterns of immigrant settlement by gender; that is, *Do boys undertake settlement roles or tasks that are qualitatively different from the activities that girls undertake? And if so, why?* Understanding immigrant settlement not only includes an analysis of the role of time elapsed since arrival but also the role of social networks, capital resources, household formation and size, gender, and as I argue in this article, the role of children.

Studies show that the presence of children in a family contemplating immigration greatly influences the decision to leave (Chávez, 1988; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994) or to stay. We also know that once in the United States, immigrants

who might have contemplated returning to their countries of origin may not do so as a result of family formation. Chávez (1988), for example, argues that even for undocumented workers, the formation of a family begins a process that leads to eventual permanent settlement. The families often become binational because they straddle the very difficult reality of unauthorized immigration status among the adult parents and citizenship status among their children and all the rights pertaining to them. Children are important factors in the decision to immigrate and in subsequent decisions to remain permanently in the new country of origin. Not well known, however, are the specific roles and gendered patterns that children undertake in assisting their parents and younger siblings with day-to-day activities and larger familial responsibilities related to immigrant settlement. This study is the first, to my knowledge, that attempts to document this process.

DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH

During the summer and fall of 1996, with the assistance of three UCLA students, I developed a questionnaire guideline and interviewed 44 adult heads of immigrant households. From these households, we then conducted another 24 interviews with the children of the adult respondents.³ Together, these 68 in-depth interviews, which averaged 2 to 3 hours each, constitute the empirical database for this article. The data used in this article are part of a larger study in which I investigate how children facilitate their immigrant families' initial settlement into the United States. When we interviewed the adult household heads, we were interested in learning how they perceived their children's assistance to family integration into U.S. culture and society in general. Similarly, when we interviewed their adult children, we wanted to learn what roles and activities they recalled undertaking in helping their newly arrived households to settle.⁴

Funding restrictions limited our interviews to Mexican-origin households. Our respondents were found through a nonrandom snowball sampling method (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Van Meter, 1990; Watters & Biernacki, 1989) undertaken in the greater Los Angeles metropolis. Each participant in the study was provided with a \$25 incentive.

Snowball sampling has been used extensively by researchers interested in surveying or interviewing hard-to-reach populations such as illicit drug users and undocumented immigrants—populations trying to remain hidden. Similarly, snowball sampling is used for hard-to-reach populations that have committed no crime but are merely difficult to find or to identify within the context of a sampling frame. For example, in this study, I would have liked to sample a representative group of Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles who arrived in the United States with children during specific time periods. This would have required that I identify a complete list of all Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles who arrived in the United States with children. I then would have randomly

selected a sizable sample, certainly much larger than my 68 interviews, to undertake this study. Undoubtedly, this would have been an expensive and complicated, if not impossible, task. One method for locating a smaller sample of Mexican immigrants with children who arrived in the United States during a specific time period is to become acquainted with one and then ask him or her for referrals to similar others. This method is also called chain referral sampling.

Eight initial snowball samples were started in Los Angeles that resulted in the 68 interviews. Each snowball sample was started in a typical Latino- or Mexican-concentrated neighborhood such as Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles. When no more referrals were forthcoming, a new snowball was started, usually through interviewing a close family friend or relative of one of the research assistants. Because our initial snowball starting point was in East Los Angeles, the largest number of respondents primarily reside there (33%), followed by Boyle Heights (13%), and a host of other smaller cities such as Bell, Santa Monica, Downey, South El Monte, Montebello, Norwalk, Whittier, and Canoga Park. Our children respondents were 9 males and 14 females. Our adult respondents were 11 males and 34 females.

For this study, I focused on institutions that I assumed are important for immigrants to know and master in day-to-day activities after initial arrival. That is, I looked at institutions that are important in providing more than survival or sustenance support but, more important, that aid in stable, productive, and assimilative settlement processes. On their arrival, immigrants are confronted with a number of different initial tasks such as procuring housing, finding employment, learning public transportation, identifying local schools, and registering their children. After initial hardships, and through the support of social networks, an immigrant family can then begin the task of long-term settlement. It is within this context, long-term settlement via mastering basic U.S. institutions such as schools, employment, unions, financial institutions, churches, and social settings, that I focus my research.

In addition to studying institutions that I believed were critical to becoming settled, I also probed for scenarios or activities that were not easily categorized or that did not fit into easily identifiable institutions that immigrant scholars usually use. As a result, I have data that reflect a number of different and unique roles and activities that children undertake in assisting their families' settlement.

We began the interviews by first asking the adults to list or describe the most important ways in which their children assisted them in their everyday lives as members of recently arrived immigrant households. Thereafter, we probed the different possible roles that children might have undertaken in helping their families navigate in different institutional settings such as the schools, the labor market, church, politics, legal and financial institutions, recreation and social occasions, health services, and a host of miscellaneous situations not easily categorized. Even though we adhered to an interview guideline, the questions and responses were all open ended and were consistently asked of all respondents.

Most of the interviews were conducted in Spanish, and all were audio recorded and then transcribed. Those in Spanish were then translated into English.

Each interview was coded according to categories related to the institutions and everyday situations listed and described above as well as a host of other codes that I developed to help me understand the role of how children might assist their families to settle. To control for immigrant-based institutional resources that did not exist at one time but do so today, we interviewed adult household heads and children who immigrated during three different eras: (a) prior to 1965, (b) between 1965 and 1985, and (c) from 1986 to the present.

The data and findings culled from this study add to the complexity of our perceptions regarding what children do in assisting their families in day-to-day activities. More important, they show how varied immigrant settlement actually is and how children of these families actually contribute significantly to this process.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Besides the many different activities that children of immigrant families undertake in helping their households to settle, several notable patterns did emerge. First, young girls seemed to participate at higher rates than boys in those tasks that required detailed explanations or translations. Second, boys, even though they assisted their households in numerous activities related to settlement, did not have the same responsibility roles or influence as did the girls in this study. Third, the eldest child, regardless of gender, often took the lead role in assisting younger siblings with what is usually done in the household by the mother, such as feeding and caring for younger siblings, getting the brothers and sisters dressed for school, transporting them to and from school, and baby-sitting.

In addition to the gender patterns above, three primary tasks summarize the roles that children undertake in assisting their household settlement. The first is as *tutors*—children served as translators, interpreters, and teachers for their parents and younger siblings. From our interviews, we documented many different instances in which children performed tutorial types of activities in day-to-day circumstances. Perhaps the most common form of tutoring involved basic translation from English to Spanish and vice versa. Translation spanned different activities including television news, important government documents and other mail, newspapers, ordering food or other services at restaurants or stores, and basic communication with English-speaking merchants and/or officials. Often intermingled with translation activities was the role of interpreting. That is, children, in addition to translating from one language to another, found themselves having to interpret and explain in better detail particularities or difficult issues that might arise in basic translations. Children became the go-between for their Spanish-speaking parents and English-speaking officials in difficult or hard-to-explain situations such as physician visits or parent-teacher appointments

involving an unruly child or disciplinary matter. Finally, children often found themselves teaching their parents certain skills or activities that ranged from the filing of taxes to explaining a difficult-to-read employment manual or discussing political or legal issues related to immigration.

A second important activity that children undertake in assisting their immigrant households to settle is as *advocates*, a role in which children intervene, mediate, or advocate on behalf of their parents or their households during difficult financial, legal, or other complicated transactions or situations. Children were sometimes asked or forced to take on important roles and activities that required some type of intervention, mediation, and/or clarification. As a result, children in their role of mediating or advocating on behalf of a younger sibling or a parent often had to confront rude salespersons, school officials, bankers, or other important people who showed little patience toward their parents or siblings. In most instances, language or the inability to clearly communicate between the parents or a younger sibling and an English-speaking official was clearly the major reason prompting intervention. This situation however differs from the role of tutor or translator in that the action described here is much more than basic translation or even interpretation and includes active engagement and mediation on the part of the child.

Third and last, children actively participate in their household settlement as *surrogate parents* in which they undertake nanny or parentlike activities in the caring of younger household members and in other household tasks. Activities that children performed in this realm included cooking, dressing, bathing, transporting, baby-sitting, caring, and providing for younger siblings. In addition to these parentlike activities, children would often be consulted by their parents in dealing with disruptive or disciplinary matters involving younger siblings. Children were likewise consulted on other matters relating to their younger siblings or on issues having to do with household decisions such as paying bills or purchasing large consumer goods.

The precarious situations that Mexican immigrants find themselves in are varied and complex. For example, undocumented status is an added factor that greatly complicates settlement and causes strain on families and children. Many children of undocumented families are legal (i.e., they were born in the United States) but, nevertheless, function in their day-to-day activities as illegal as a result of their parents' status. The data collected for this study show that children actively participated in legalization processes and that, to a large degree, children were primarily responsible for getting their parents through the naturalization process either as financial or moral supporters or by prodding their parents to become legal residents or naturalized citizens.

In the sections that follow, I look at four specific institutional settings and/or scenarios that immigrants confront on an almost daily basis: (a) schools, (b) financial resources and complex transactions, (c) labor markets and legal and political institutions, and (d) health services. In each of these sections, I explicate the three different gender patterns described above and the three primary

roles (tutor, advocate, and surrogate parent) and activities that children undertake in assisting their immigrant households to settle.

SCHOOLS

On their arrival to the United States, immigrant families with young children are quickly introduced to the U.S. decentralized school system. Learning about a school system is not easy nor does it follow a set pattern or prescribed path. For example, school districts vary in enrollment periods, start days, and placement requirements and in Los Angeles, year-round schooling⁵ only adds to the confusion, not to mention the numerous school districts that blanket this large metropolis.⁶ For newcomers attempting to locate housing, working in several jobs, or being preoccupied with other day-to-day activities, learning about the school system is often doled out to the eldest or another sibling in the household. Here, I do not suggest that schooling has a lower priority for immigrant families but, rather, that children, in attending school on a daily basis, are more apt to deal with irregularities or regular activities related to schools than are their working parents. Children walk with their older siblings to school, act as interpreters between teachers and their parents, and often take a larger role among their siblings in school success or failure. Parents were not, however, completely uninvolved in their children's school activities.

Interfacing with the school system was, in many instances, relegated to mothers and the eldest children. This was evident from our sample, where fathers tended to relegate the responsibility of schooling in the household to their spouses or to their children's mother. One school-age respondent remarked that getting her father to attend school-related activities was difficult. "When they [parents] did go, we had to persuade them. We had to drive them to the conferences. Especially my father, he never wanted to go to the parent conferences. 'Let your mother take care of that, why do I need to be there for?'" In addition to explicit commentary about the minimal role of fathers in the school system, such as the above, female respondents consistently made reference to school activities or school-administrated functions that involved the mother rather than the father, suggesting a larger level of involvement for females.

Parental involvement in the schooling activities of nonimmigrant families is also gendered, with mothers usually undertaking the bulk of tending to their children's educational needs and the day-to-day school activities and administrative requirements such as enrollment, parent-teacher conferences, after-school activities, and homework. Although the schooling responsibilities of children clearly fell on mothers a majority of the time, gender does not seem to be a factor in children assuming these tasks for their parents. That is, both boys and girls undertook this role on a regular basis.

The one pattern, however, that was evident was the role that the eldest undertook in caring for the younger brothers and sisters in the day-to-day activities related to school, such as supervising homework, transporting to or picking up younger siblings from school, and making sure that younger brothers or sisters were fed and clothed in preparation for school that day. An adult respondent describes her eldest son's role in this regard:

He would help me in the morning by driving them to school, pushing them to go to school. . . . He was 9 years old when I brought him here, and he always helped his brothers put on clothes in the morning, he would feed them and then driving them to school, and bringing them back. Jaime would wake up and help his younger brothers change their clothes and get them ready for school.

In a similar pattern, another adult respondent describes the role of her eldest daughter: "When the children were younger, Martina was the one who translated at school and helped with the children's schooling the most." Martina, on the other hand, describes her role in her siblings' education as a bit more involved:

There was always more involvement, there were always open houses, and there was always someone at school who didn't behave and emergency cards, or lunch school applications. Any form that came from school, year round, I had to do that. I had to be involved in it. Or any questions regarding whatever, I had to be involved with it. 'Well it is your sister's graduation next week. What kind of dress do you think we should get her?' Or, 'Is it true that your sister is graduating next week, or is she lying to us?' 'Is it true that your brother or sister has to stay after school because the teacher said they need to do something more?' It was always, 'What do you think?' and it was always me.

This last commentary suggests that parents, although they might not have been directly involved in the day-to-day activities of their children, nevertheless did attempt to keep abreast of their school-age children by communicating or assessing their children's progress or school activities via an older child. This older child, in essence, almost became an equal at least in regard to parents asking his or her opinion about younger siblings' school performances or day-to-day activities.

Immigrant children undertake an important role in assisting their households to adapt to or become integrated in the U.S. school system. Their role is perhaps similar to families with few financial resources, to large families, or to families with two breadwinners—situations that all require that children undertake greater degrees of responsibility in their households. Immigrant families are often poor or have two adults working to make ends meet, or they merely do not understand the particularities and varied processes of schooling in the United States. In addition, immigrant families, in the process of adapting to a new host society, relegate certain tasks and responsibilities to their children that distribute

household responsibilities among different members. As a result, immigrant children become intimately involved in their younger siblings' education.

FINANCIAL RESOURCES AND COMPLEX TRANSACTIONS

Perhaps the biggest challenge awaiting newcomers on arrival to the United States is obtaining financial resources necessary for survival. This is often accomplished through employment and to a lesser extent through kin, loans, or saved capital from the country of origin. Through social networks and other methods of job search, immigrants in Los Angeles and elsewhere in the United States are quite successful in procuring jobs, albeit often in low-paying and low-skilled occupations. Obtaining a job is really the first step in establishing some form of household stability that allows newcomers to ease into other settlement processes such as obtaining shelter, clothing, and nourishment. However, because immigrants are mostly employed in low-paying occupations, household financial resources are stretched; spouses are forced to work at home, maintaining the household, and outside so as to contribute monetarily to the home; and immigrant children fully cognizant of the household financial situation feel pressured to also contribute to making ends meet. As a result, children of immigrant households play a significant role in their financial stability.

There are two ways that children of immigrant households are immersed in assisting their parents financially—first as monetary contributors and second as mediators of complex financial transactions. Both are extremely important, and both were evident in many of the households interviewed for this study. In addition, a gender pattern clearly emerged with girls undertaking a larger role than boys in assisting their households both as financial contributors and as interlopers in complex transactions.

In strict economic terms, household members can serve both as financial resources and as expenditures. Children in the postindustrial United States however are rarely thought of as financial resources or expenses but, rather, as sentimental or emotionally "priceless" children (Zelizer, 1985). Nevertheless, immigrant children, teenagers actually, performed paid labor functions so as to contribute to familial resources. Of course, not all children of immigrant households work or, for that matter, work so as to contribute to their families' households, but in several instances, older children toiled to assist their parents. The two examples come from two respondents recalling their work contributions to their households as teenagers.

As soon as I was 16, I started working. But they [parents] never really asked us to contribute to the house economically. It was more if you wanted to give. If you wanted to contribute to the family that's fine. But I did contribute, 'Well here's half of my paycheck.' If you think about it, I was in high school, there isn't that many

expenses except for your senior year with the prom, yearbook and stuff. I worked during the weekends. . . . I would just give half of my paycheck to the house.

During the summer of 1988 I held two jobs—that's when I was really contributing to the household. Any bills or anything that needed to be paid, I paid them.

Other children respondents remembered working alongside their parents assisting them in their jobs, often receiving little or no pay. This ostensibly would free up time for the father to either work at another job or spend time at home with the family.

I remember that when I was younger, we used to work. We were in junior high, and my sister and I would go clean offices with my father. We would be out there until 11 at night. We cleaned the offices, throwing trash away, dusting, things like that. And sometimes we had to talk to the managers to get supplies and things like that.

Girls in immigrant households often served as go-betweens in complex financial matters such as the purchasing of a home, the filing of income taxes, or the controlling of the financial duties of the household. Most of the respondents who answered that they had assisted their parents either financially or through financial institutions were female. This is not to suggest that boys did not contribute to household finances but that clearly the girls in my sample were the overwhelming contributors. Little reference however was made to their gender as a possible explanation as to why it was the females who undertook this important familial role. Nevertheless, more often girls rather than boys undertook this role. As Xochitl remarked,

If something needed to be bought I took it upon myself to purchase it. I just took the initiative and if I saw that there was something needed in the household I would do it. I did manage the house and the household finances for a time when my dad was not working. It was actually for a long time. I would basically pay the bills.

The adult respondents also commented on the role that their daughters played in assisting their families with large financial transactions such as purchasing a home or a new car or filling out credit card applications. An adult respondent, Paula, describes the role that her daughter Martha undertook:

When we refinanced this house, Martha was the one in charge of all the paperwork because the first time we did it, we were taken for \$18,000. She looked at the papers and said that our payments weren't paying for the house, we were just paying interest. When she found out, Martha at the age of 16 took 2 days to call different places and to find out information. She arranged to have our home refinanced by a different bank so that we could save money from a lower interest rate.

Whatever the outcome of their assistance, girls provided either financial support through direct monetary contributions, by assistance at work, or by providing invaluable information or mediating transactions that are complex or that

require a large degree of translation and academic background. Having another family member explain complex financial transactions serves a very important function in any family attempting to settle in a foreign country. In the case of immigrant households, young girls seem to be undertaking this role to a larger degree than boys are. The anxiety that any new homeowner confronts when making such a large purchase is great, and the frustration that emanates from not understanding printed material is large, even among U.S.-born English-speaking Americans. The role that children from immigrant households undertake in assisting their parents financially is great and helps lower levels of frustration but, perhaps more important, facilitates permanent settlement in the United States.

LABOR MARKETS AND LEGAL AND POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

Mexican immigrants come to the United States primarily to seek jobs. The role of social networks is extremely important in disseminating job information and in procuring jobs for recent arrivals (Chávez, 1988; Massey et al., 1987). For many Mexican immigrants, job procurement comes by word of mouth from extended kin or compatriots from the same village or town in Mexico. Indeed, the role of social networks is well established in helping us understand how many Mexican immigrants obtain jobs almost immediately after arriving in the United States. Little, however, is known regarding the role of children in the process of securing jobs or, as this section describes, in maintaining job stability.

Children have little to contribute in assisting their parents secure employment. No respondents spoke of their children actually helping them get jobs. However, I did find that children play an important role in their parents' employment stability by informing them about worker's rights, taxes, benefits, and other personnel issues related to their jobs. Once again, it appears to be primarily the girls who undertake this role of worker advocate or interloper on behalf of working parents.

A typical response from a mother describing the role of her young daughter regarding a personnel issue provides a good example of how children translated, but more important, how they explained and taught their parents about the regulations contained in an unwieldy personnel manual.

In my husband's job, for example, if there was a policy or regulation about the company. Then we would ask Patty—for example, in the policy [manual] it said you can't go this fast on the forklift—regulations like that [help] to avoid accidents. To make sure we understood it. It wasn't just one little paper, it was a big book that said what should be done and what shouldn't be done.

The stress involved in not being able to understand job descriptions or safety regulations while on the job is large for recent arrivals. The important role of Patty and other children who do more than merely translate is lost in simple descriptions of reading or translating to Spanish a new company letter or regulation, as one teenage daughter describes:

My dad would get letters from work and he didn't understand what they were about so I had to kind of translate or I would tell him what they were asking for or what they were all about, but it wasn't just about reading the letter. . . . Yeah, translation and interpretation. There is lots of things that my parents didn't understand. As far as like technical terms like my dad's job. Because they always sent him information and he didn't know what it was about and I had to educate him.

Mexican immigrant workers occupy the worse paying and perhaps the most abusive jobs in Los Angeles's labor market. As a result, they confront poor working conditions and are exposed to work hazards with much greater risks than nonimmigrants are (Mozingo, 1997). For employers, one of the attractions of hiring immigrant labor is the immigrants' tolerance for difficult or hazardous work sites where they can be easily injured. In several interviews, adult respondents underlined how their children intervened on their behalf to prevent abuses and injuries at the workplace.

I had an accident at my job. Both of my children helped me. They interpreted for me when I went to the doctors. I was under medical supervision. And they would read the papers and tell me where to go. They would tell me not to go to work because I was so sick. They said I should not go to work. I told them that the company doctor said I could work, that I was fine, that there was no reason not to work. They (my daughters) said, 'No, even if the doctor told you, if you don't feel well, why should you go?' They gave me advice to look for an attorney. My children also told me to get another doctor. One that wasn't associated with the company. They helped me find a doctor and then an attorney.

Similar to intervening on behalf of their parents on issues of worker rights, young children, again mostly the daughters, were involved in assisting their parents or their parents' friends with legal issues.

Once a friend of the family had a problem with the law. My daughters called around and found out the means to resolve this problem. Another time, a woman we know had a problem with a ticket and a warrant. My daughter called and took her where she needed to go in order to resolve the problem.

The political participation (voting, registration, parties) of immigrants is low, perhaps due to multiple reasons such as lack of citizenship, thus the inability to vote; general disdain for politics, which in Mexico is often linked to corruption; and of course, the same reasons that apply to the 80% or so of the American populace that does not participate in politics. After reviewing the responses to

queries about politics, I was impressed by the level of interaction between parents and their children over issues such as U.S. presidential elections, local elections, and issues related to civil rights or Mexican American/Chicano politics. "My parents wanted to know what was going on . . . so they would ask, 'Who's the presidential candidate, what does he represent, what does he offer?'"

Several (6) of the children that we interviewed had gone to college and obtained bachelor's or associate's degrees. During college, some had participated in student advocacy or politically oriented organizations, and they would share their experiences with household members. Of the 6 students who attended college, 2 were women, and it was only these 2 that participated to any degree in politics at their respective universities. In fact, they participated a great deal in politics, one actually being arrested for protesting and the other assuming a leadership role in a Latina-only organization that advocates on behalf of other Latinas. Their discussions at home of campus political involvement on their part was well received perhaps because both women had taken on leadership positions or were convincing about the worthiness of their causes. The one student who was arrested even influenced her mother and father to protest at a large rally and march against California's Proposition 187.⁷

HEALTH SERVICES

Children also assisted their parents with the health care system. Almost all of the adult respondents reported that their children had assisted them in various capacities related to health services. These activities included accompanying them to yearly doctor visits, translating professional diagnoses from English to Spanish, and caring for ill parents at home. In the arena of health services, no clear gender difference emerged. Both the boys and the girls were involved in translating either for the father or the mother. However, unlike translating school concerns, personnel manuals, or even complex financial transactions, the respondents voiced a certain level of difficulty in explaining medical ailments to doctors and then explaining the doctors' responses or questions back to their parents. For example, Jose describes his role as a young teenager translating for his mother.

My mom has heart problems. And I remember as a kid, it was a little bit scary, and she had an episode where she got pretty sick, so I couldn't exactly communicate what she was feeling to the doctor. The doctor would ask her in English, she could understand herself but just couldn't communicate, and I would translate for her but it just wasn't a complete communication with the doctor. So it did affect her a lot. Because the doctors wanted to know exactly what you're feeling.

Although translations are often awkward, those undertaken in a hospital or doctor's office seemed to be especially embarrassing, difficult, and dehumaniz-

ing for boys and girls. Angelo describes his experience as a young boy accompanying his mother to visit a doctor over an illness she wanted checked.

We always went with our parents. We always had to be the ones telling the doctor what was going on. Tell the doctors that we didn't have insurance. And we pretty much did all the talking. As soon as the doctor walked in they would notice that my parents didn't speak English. They would ask the first question like what was wrong or this and that. And the minute I would answer—from that point on—they wouldn't really look at my parent. The minute they asked the first question I would answer it and from that point on they wouldn't really make eye contact with my mom, they would just tell us. The only time they would turn to them was when they saw me ask my mom something, then they would look at her to see what she said to me, and then they looked at me when I answered.

Girls similarly undertook these important roles and also experienced embarrassing or difficult situations when it came to translating difficult information regarding a parent's health condition. Marta describes one particular visit, accompanying her father to a doctor's office, in which she became frustrated over her struggle with English and having to nevertheless interpret:

And sometimes the Anglo doctors and nurses would get upset with me because I would speak English in a broken kind of English and I was barely like 6 or 7. So, I would get really upset or nervous. And my dad would get upset because I'm not translating right, and the doctor would get upset because I'm not translating right. So sometimes the hospital staff would get mad.

There is no denying that children assisted their immigrant parents greatly in the provision and translation of health services. It is also evident that both boys and girls assisted their parents in this role without any clear gender pattern (e.g., girls assisting only their mothers or boys assisting only their fathers). Below, I discuss the implications of my findings and attempt to explain why certain gender patterns exist in some institutions and why they do not exist in others.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of this study point to important roles that children undertake in caring and providing for immigrant households as they navigate through the process of settlement. Table 1 summarizes the different institutional settings in which children contribute significantly in assisting their parents and households to settle. In addition, Table 1 identifies those settings in which a gender pattern emerged.

The data from the in-depth interviews suggest gender patterns, with girls undertaking specific roles more often than boys do. This was not always the case, however, especially when age surfaced as the primary indicator as to who would care for younger siblings and/or parents. In addition, both boys and girls

TABLE 1: Children's Roles in the Settlement of Mexican Immigrant Households

	<i>Role</i>	<i>Gender Patterns</i>
School settings	Tutors	In the household, mothers clearly took on this role.
	Surrogate parents	Among children, no clear gendered pattern emerged.
Financial resources and complex transactions	Financial contributors Mediators in complex transactions Advocates	Girls clearly undertook these role more frequently than boys did.
Employment-related issues	Tutors Advocates	Girls clearly undertook these roles more frequently than boys did.
Legal institutions and issues	Advocates	Girls clearly undertook these roles more frequently than boys did.
Political involvement	Tutors Advocates-activists	Girls clearly undertook these roles more frequently than boys did.
Health services	Tutors Advocates Care givers	There was no clear gender pattern.

also participated more equally in translating difficult medical jargon and accompanying their parents in visits to health providers.

When an immigrant arrived in the United States (pre-1965, 1965-1985, or after 1985) was not a significant factor in determining whether parents and immigrant households relied less or more on their children for assistance. This suggests that perhaps immediate household members rely on each other initially to a greater extent for support, at least in regard to the institutions that I analyzed in this study, regardless of whether community and social network resources exist or if they arrived during a different decade. Children were as likely to participate in important household settlement activities (e.g., translating, care giving, contributing financially) whether they immigrated to Los Angeles with their families prior to 1965 or after 1985.

What explains the larger roles that girls undertake in four out of the six institutional settings that I studied for this article? Several factors help us understand these processes. First, although assistance from children was expected, girls undertook these expectations more readily and in turn were rewarded with a modicum of independence. Similar to Hondagneu-Sotelo's (1994) important finding that women move toward more egalitarian relationships with their spouses after immigrating to the United States, girls likewise are given more credibility, responsibility, and thus a greater degree of independence, perhaps similar to that of their brothers. That is, girls, given their important roles in their

households as translators, interlopers, mediators, and especially, surrogate parents, are seen by both their younger and even older siblings and by their parents performing under difficult and strenuous circumstances. These girls in turn are able to exert some degree of independence or authority, certainly with their siblings, over certain household privileges or tasks. This of course is tempered somewhat; after all, they are still children or young teenagers under the tutelage of their parents, and the roles that girls undertake in an immigrant Mexican household are by and large well defined and secondary to those of the boys.

Second, the parents and the children in larger households (e.g., where several siblings, both boys and girls, live) may have participated in a double standard of sorts with regard to household activity assignments. Girls, given predefined roles that relegate them to household or home activities, participated to a much larger degree than did boys in institutional matters that could easily be completed at home. With the exception of financially contributing to the household, the roles in which girls were clearly in charge were in the home. In contrast, the two institutional settings outside of the home (schooling and health) showed no clear gender patterns and required larger degrees of independence and adultlike responsibilities. In these settings, boys as much as girls undertook important roles with their younger siblings and parents. Girls, to a greater degree than boys, undertook certain roles and tasks in assisting their households to settle, in part because of predetermined roles that girls and boys have in Mexican households.

Third, even though the findings clearly suggest a gender pattern in who assisted their siblings and parents, boys were not completely devoid of assistance; they just assisted less frequently in home-type activities. There were some instances in which boys undertook important roles in their households, roles that I have characterized as being girl dominated. For example, although caring for younger siblings in school settings meant meeting with teachers, walking the kids to school, and participating in school activities, boys also helped in girl- or woman-defined domestic activities such as preparing the children for school by getting them dressed, feeding them, or making sure their homework was complete. Nevertheless, because school and health settings in which children played important roles were outside of the household or "girl" domain, boys and girls equally participated. This clearly indicates that when boys did participate in important settlement activities it was to a much larger degree outside of the household rather than inside of it.

Several important factors support my primary finding that girls, more so than boys, assist their families' settlement in household-related activities. Research on Latino families (Zambrana, 1995) and Chicana feminism (Garcia, 1989) clearly documents the traditional roles that women and, by extension, girls are relegated to in their households. Similarly, double standards also exist between boys and girls, in which boys are allowed to venture outside of the household whether it be for labor, recreation, or household responsibilities. Girls in Mexican-origin families are usually spatially bound and are not permitted to

venture too far from the home for a number of different cultural and structural reasons. For example, a father and mother often wish to protect or guard their daughter's virginity. Likewise, parents insist that their daughters need to stay at home to care for younger siblings or even older brothers or that they need to assist with other household duties. College admissions officers often point to the difficulty in matriculating Latinas due to parents' cultural fears and notions that either their daughters do not need a college education or that they can enroll in the local junior college or university.

Through this article, I have explored the ways in which girls and boys facilitate the establishment of permanent settlement in Mexican immigrant households. The findings help us better understand the role of children in different settlement processes and, equally important, how gender interacts with immigration. The patterns, roles, and activities that I culled from this study add to the complexity of what children do in assisting their families in day-to-day activities. More important, they show how varied immigrant settlement actually is and the significance of children in this process. As a result of undertaking active roles and activities in their households, girls are challenging to some degree some of the cultural and patriarchal legacies described above.

NOTES

1. One point five generation, first coined by Rubén G. Rumbaut (1990), refers to an immigrant who arrives in the United States as a child and basically goes through a similar adaptive (acculturation, assimilation) process as a native-born child. The one-point-five moniker refers to the child as straddling an immigrant (first-generation) background on one hand and a background of a child born to immigrant parents (second-generation) on the other.

2. The Bracero Program was a legal agreement between the United States and Mexico that provided for Mexican nationals to work in the United States as temporary workers; that is, workers were recruited and contracted to work for a period of time, and then they returned to Mexico.

3. Most of the "children" interviews were actually interviews with adults who we queried about their childhood contributions to their households. Thus, when I make reference to children respondents, I am not referring to them as children in the literal sense but, rather, based on their recollections, to their experiences as children in their particular households.

4. At the outset, I would like to emphasize that this study was unfortunately not intended to investigate how boys and girls, within a specific gender context, assisted their immigrant households to settle. As a result, questions were not asked regarding gender-specific tasks, activities, and roles and on how gender interacts with children in settlement. My findings for this study are derived from carefully culling a difficult database and putting together gender trends, activities, and roles among children that emerged from this database from hours of research.

5. Several years ago, most of the schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District moved away from typical 9-month school years (e.g., September to June) to year-round school years to account for overenrollment that is in part the result of increased immigration and other demographic factors.

6. Southern California, which often includes in its definition the counties of Los Angeles, Ventura, San Bernardino, Riverside, and Orange, provides a massive landscape from which to navigate between city services, educational resources and institutions, and of course, school districts. Together, these five counties account for many different school districts, each with its own set of regulations, requirements, and structures.

7. This proposition, which won decisively in the electorate but failed in the courts, denies access to publicly funded social services to undocumented California residents through five measures regarding the provision of education, health care and other social services, law enforcement and the use of false immigration, social security, and citizenship documents.

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