EXTENDED ABSTRACT

ACADEMIC OUTCOMES OF YOUTH IN "NON-TRADITIONAL" TWO-PARENT FAMILIES: THE EFFECTS OF IMMIGRANT STATUS

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INTRODUCTION

This research examines differences in the ways that family structure affects the academic outcomes of immigrant and native-born adolescents in the United States, as well as possible explanations for these differences. Much previous research has indicated the importance of family structure for the well-being and achievement of adolescents. For example, living in single parent, step-parent and cohabiting family structures has been linked to higher levels of adolescent depression, lower positive well-being, greater risk-taking behavior, and poorer academic outcomes (e.g. Amato 1993; Astone & McLanahan 1994; Cherlin & Furstenberg 1994; Day 1992; Hoffman & Johnson 1998; McLanahan & Sandefur 1994; Pong 1997; Zill 1996). Some recent research suggests that the adolescents at greatest risk for poor academic outcomes may be those in the most "non-traditional" of family forms (e.g. stepfamilies formed following divorce or non-marital childbirth and two-"parent" families formed through cohabitation) (e.g. Tillman 2003; Wojtkiewicz 1993). However, the effects of family structure may be conditioned by the cultural contexts in which families are embedded.

Despite the fact that at least 20 percent of all school-aged children in the U.S. are either immigrants or the children of immigrants, strikingly little research examines whether the negative effects of living within non-traditional family forms are as great for immigrant youth as for non-immigrant youth. Many immigrant families come to the United States from cultures that

place a greater emphasis upon familial responsibilities and obligations than does the United States. Perhaps these cultural values motivate immigrant families to "act like" traditional, two-biological parent families, even if they do not conform to the traditional standard in terms of their family structure. If this is the case, living in a non-traditional family form may be associated with fewer negative effects on the outcomes of immigrants.

This research will address these gaps in the literature and expand our general understanding of the mechanisms that underlie the association between family structure and adolescent academic outcomes. The data for this research are drawn from the *National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health* (Add Health), a nationally representative study of adolescents in grades 7 through 12.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Increasing rates of divorce, remarriage, non-marital childbearing, and cohabitation have dramatically changed the types of families in which American children and adolescents live (Booth & Dunn 1994; Cherlin & Furstenberg 1994; Teachman et al. 2000). Concern over the changing structure of American families has led to substantial research on the ways in which family structure affects child well-being. One of the most consistent findings in this area of research is that young people who are raised by both biological parents experience significantly higher levels of well-being than do those who are raised in single parent, stepparent, or cohabiting families (Cherlin & Furstenberg 1994). On average, these youth tend to have better academic outcomes (Astone & McLanahan 1994; McLanahan & Sandefur 1994; Pong 1997; Zill 1996), experience better mental health (Amato 1993), exhibit fewer behavioral problems, and

engage in fewer high-risk activities like drinking, drug use, and sexual activity (Day 1992; Hoffman & Johnson 1998; McLanahan & Sandefur 1994).

In terms of academic outcomes, research has consistently indicated that adolescents who do not live with both biological parents tend to experience significantly poorer grades, achievement scores, high school completion rates, school attendance rates (Astone & McLanahan 1994; McLanahan & Sandefur 1994; Pong 1997; Zill 1996), and school-related behavior (Day 1992; Hoffman & Johnson 1998) than their peers living with both biological parents. Furthermore, the high school completion rates and academic achievement of youth in stepfamilies and cohabiting families are often similar to those of their peers in single mother families (Tillman 2003; Wojtkiewicz 1993). Other research suggests that the adolescents at greatest risk for poor academic outcomes may be those in the most non-traditional of family forms (e.g. stepfamilies formed following divorce or non-marital birth and two-parent families formed through cohabitation). A large portion of this academic disadvantage appears to be explained by the greater likelihood of adolescents in these non-traditional family forms to experience socioeconomic disadvantage, to have experienced a parental divorce, to have poor relationships with and less supervision by their resident and non-resident parent-figures, and to be living with step- and/or half-siblings (Tillman 2003).

However, the effects of different family experiences may be conditioned by the cultural and social contexts in which families are embedded. Although adequate explanations for social group differences have not yet been clearly developed, empirical results indicate the existence of significant racial and ethnic differences in the effects of family structure upon adolescent well-being. For example, controlling for socio-demographic factors, the academic outcomes and behavior of Black and Hispanic youth appear to be less negatively affected by living in non-

traditional families (e.g. McLanahan & Sandefur 1994; Tillman 2003) or by experiencing family structure change (Tillman 2003) than are the outcomes of White youth.

Immigrant status may also condition the effects of family structure on the academic outcomes of youth. Despite many social and economic disadvantages, immigrant children tend to exhibit fewer behavioral and psychological problems and to experience better academic outcomes than their non-immigrant peers of similar demographic characteristics (Harker 2001; Hirschman 1996; Jensen & Chitose 1996; Kao 1999; Kao & Tienda 1995; Keller & Tillman 2006; Portes & Rumbaut 1996, 2001; Rumbaut 1997, 1999; Tillman, Guo & Harris 2006). The fact that immigrant children are more likely than others to live in two-parent families is often cited as one factor that helps to explain part of this immigrant "advantage" (Jensen & Chitose 1996; Portes & Rumbaut 1996, 2001). Yet, we know little about the past family structure experiences or the kinds of two-parent families in which immigrant youth live. We also know little about whether immigrant children are affected by family structure experiences in a manner similar to non-immigrant children.

Many immigrant families come to the United States from cultures that emphasize familial responsibilities and obligations more than does our own. Research has shown that, regardless of socioeconomic background, immigrant children's parents are less permissive, supervise and control children's activities more, expect more obedience from children, and have higher academic expectations for children (Hao & Bonstead-Bruns 1998; Harker 2001; Kao & Tienda 1995; Keller & Tillman 2006; Portes & Rumbaut 2001). Immigrant parents also tend to teach their children to hold greater respect for authority figures (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco 1995) and are more likely to cultivate strong ties within an ethnic community, providing their children with an important source of social support and reinforcing traditional norms and

behaviors (Portes & Rumbaut 2001). These types of parenting behaviors are generally associated with positive academic outcomes during adolescence.

However, no previous research has examined whether these kinds of behaviors are more often found among immigrant families as a whole, or only among two-*biological* parent immigrant families. Perhaps cultural values that emphasize the importance of familial responsibility and obligation provide extra motivation for immigrant families to "act like" traditional, two-biological parent families, even if they are "non-traditional" in terms of family structure. For example, immigrant step-parents may be more inclined than their non-immigrant peers to take on traditional parental duties and roles. If so, we should expect that the outcomes of immigrant youth in stepfamilies would not be as negatively affected as would the outcomes of non-immigrant youth in this family form. We should also expect that some country-of-origin differences might exist among immigrants, since the current immigrant population originates from a diverse array of countries and cultural backgrounds. This study seeks to examine these issues.

METHODOLOGY

Analytic goals

Our key analytic objectives are to: (1) Examine the family structure experiences of immigrant adolescents in the United States; (2) Examine whether the academic outcomes of immigrant youth are affected by family structure in a manner similar to non-immigrant youth, and whether the effects of family structure are also conditioned by country-of-origin; and (3) Examine whether parental behaviors and family dynamics that have been shown to "protect" the

academic outcomes of youth are experienced more frequently by immigrant youth in "non-traditional" two-parent families than by non-immigrant youth in these families.

For example, are immigrant adolescents in stepfamilies less likely than other youth in these family forms to experience conflicts in their relationships with resident and non-resident parent figures? Are immigrant stepfamilies more likely to "act like" two-biological parent families in terms of parental expectations, parent-child interactions and parental supervision/control?

Data

To address these questions, we will use the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health). Add Health is a nationally representative study of adolescents in grades 7 through 12 in the United States in 1995, based on a multistage, stratified, school-based, cluster sampling design. This study was designed to explain the causes of adolescent health and health behavior, primarily focusing on the multiple circumstances in which they live and their outcomes in young adulthood. Included in the sample were students from 80 high schools (both public and private) and a corresponding feeder junior high or middle school. Minority ethnic groups were sampled in proportion to their size within the United States population, however smaller ethnic groups were over-sampled (Harris et al. 2003).

Add Health involves three waves of data collection and several data collection components. The In-School component, a self-administered questionnaire, and the School Administrator Questionnaire, which focused on school characteristics, were conducted during 1994-1995. School enrollment rosters were then used to randomly select students from each school to participate in a more extensive Wave I In-Home interview (approximately 21,000 respondents). At this time Wave I Parental Questionnaires were also completed by one of the participants' parents or guardians, usually a mother. Additional waves of in-home interviews

were conducted in 1996 and in 2001-2002.

These data are ideal for this project because they contain over-samples of smaller ethnic groups, many of which contain a high proportion of immigrants, as well as detailed longitudinal information about academic outcomes, family structure and household composition during adolescence. Our base sample of 18,502 individuals includes all respondents who have fully completed Wave I in-home interviews and Wave I Parental Questionnaires. This sample will be used to provide a descriptive picture of the family structure experiences of immigrant youth in the U.S. Given the small numbers of immigrant youth found in some of the less common family forms, the sample used throughout the analyses will include a subset of 12,579 individuals who live within either a two-biological parent family or a married stepfamily.

Dependent Measures

Academic Outcomes. Our two dependent variables are grade-point average (GPA) and school-related behavior problems. GPA is a self-reported, continuous variable ranging from 1 (D/F) to 4 (A), which measures an average of grades received in English, history, science and math during the past academic year. The sample mean of GPA is 2.9, which is equivalent to approximately a B average. School-related behavior problems are measured as an index representing the mean item score across four self-reported, five-category ordinal items (having trouble getting along with students, getting along with teachers, paying attention in school, and getting homework done) with responses ranging from "never" (0) to "every day" (4). The sample mean of behavior problems is 1.02 ("just a few times during the past school year").

Independent Measures

Family Structure. Family structure captures both the biological and legal relationships between the adolescent and all co-resident parent figures, as reported by the adolescent. All

adolescents in the base sample are classified as living in one of the following: *two biological parent families*, *married stepfamilies*, *cohabiting stepfamilies*, *single parent families*, or *no-parent families*. Adolescents are classified as living in a no-parent family if they do not list any household member as having a "parent"-type (e.g., biological, step or adoptive) relationship with them. Only youth living in two-biological parent families and married stepfamilies will be included in most analyses.

Immigrant Status. Immigrant status is determined by both the youth's and the parents' country-of-origin. We classify the respondents as first-, second-, or third-plus generation. First-generation immigrants are respondents who were born abroad (and not as a U.S. citizen born in a foreign country). Second-generation individuals are those who have at least one parent of foreign birth, but who themselves were either born in the United States or in a foreign country as a U.S. citizen. Finally, youth who were born in the U.S. to parents who were also born in the U.S. are classified as the third-plus generation. All third-plus generation individuals are considered to be part of the native-born American population. Further analyses will also explore country-of-origin differences among first generation immigrants.

Family Relationships and Dynamics. The analyses will explore the academic effects of a wide variety of measures that tap into the family relationships and parent-child dynamics found within adolescents' resident families. *Quality of Relationship with Resident Parents* is measured with the question, "How close do you feel to your {mother/father/etc.}?", which was asked of the adolescent about each resident parent. The response categories range from low (1) to high (5). *Conflict with Resident Parents* is measured with a dichotomous variable, indicating whether the adolescent had experienced a serious argument with at least one resident parent about his or her behavior in the past month (0=no, 1=yes). For youth living in stepparent families, we also

create a variable that indicates *How the Stepparent was Identified by the Youth* during the interview process. During the interviews, each respondent was asked to provide a list of all people who regularly live in their household. In the case of a stepparent, youth could have identified the person as either a "parent/mother/father" (and then specified that this person was a stepparent rather than a biological parent) or as their biological parent's "partner/husband/wife".

Parental Control is measured as an index representing the mean item score of six questions (original responses ranging from 1 to 5) and assesses how much control youth feel they have over their own lives. Examples of the items include: "Do your parents control how much television you watch on a daily basis?", "Do your parents control the type of clothing you wear?", and "Do your parents control how much time you spend out on a weeknight?". *Parental Supervision* is measured with a count variable ranging from 1 to 4, indicating whether at least one parent-figure is usually at home with the adolescent during the following times of day: when the adolescent goes to school, comes home from school, eats an evening meal, and goes to bed.

Parents' College Expectations are taken from the Parental Questionnaire, which asked parents "How disappointed would you be if [name of child] did not graduate from college?" The response categories for this measure are in a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 ("very disappointed") to 5 ("not disappointed"). *Parental Involvement in School* is also taken from the Parental Questionnaire and is measured with a dichotomous variable indicating whether the parent was either a member of their child's PTA or had recently participated in a school event (0=no, 1=yes).

Parents' Religiosity is measured with parental reports of how important religion is to them. The response categories range from 1 (low) to 4 (high). *Religious Attendance* is measured

with a dichotomous variable that assesses whether the youth reports having attended church/synagogue/religious services with parent/s within the last 4 weeks (0=no, 1=yes).

Controls. Analyses will control for sex, years of age, and race/ethnicity, all of which are obtained from the adolescents' in-home interviews. In terms of race/ethnicity, respondents' are classified as: Non-Hispanic White, Non-Hispanic Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, or Asian/Pacific Islander.

We will also control for the effects of various family background variables that represent the socioeconomic and structural features of the family environment. Five dummy variables measure family income (measured in thousands): $15,000 or less; $16-34,000; $35-59,000; $60,000 or more; and missing income data. Family education is measured with four dummy variables: less than high school; high school graduate or GED; more than high school; and missing education data. Resident mother's work status is measured by a dummy variable indicating whether or not the mother had worked full-time (more than 35 hours per week) during the last 12 months. Sibling composition is measured by a dichotomous variable indicating whether or not the respondent lives with full-siblings only (as opposed to having half-/step-/foster siblings present). We will include a series of dummy variables to examine the effects of past family structure experiences, including whether or not the respondent had ever experienced the divorce of biological parents, had ever experienced a biological parent's death, had been born to a single mother, or had always lived with both parents. Finally, we will examine measures of the proportion of life the adolescent has spent living in his/her current residence, his/her current family structure and his/her current sibling group.

Analytic Procedures. We will first present descriptive statistics to provide a picture of the family structure experiences and family relationship characteristics of immigrant youth in the

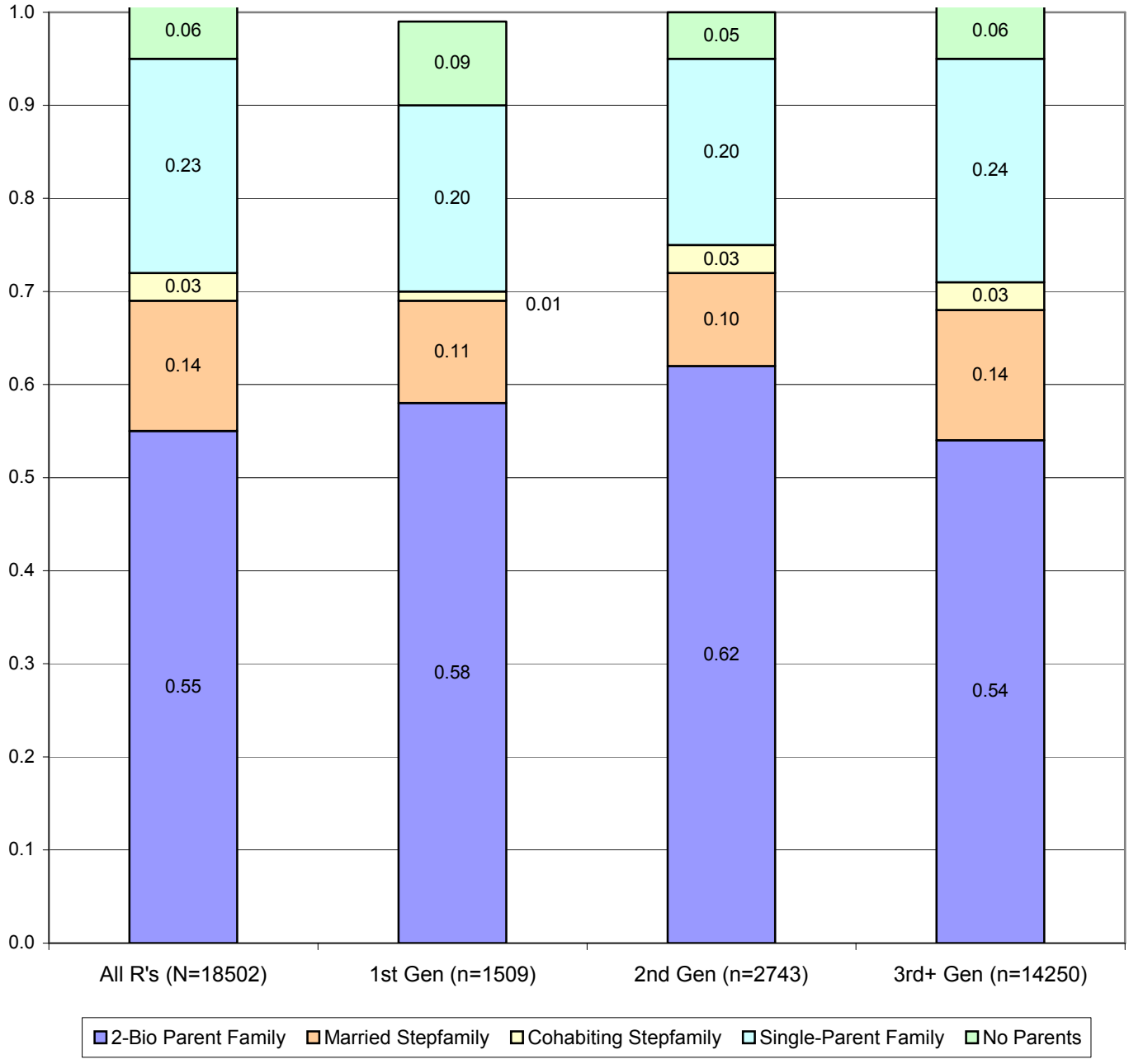
U.S. We will then conduct multivariate analyses, employing both ordinary least squares regression (OLS) and logistic regression techniques. Using Chow tests, we will directly examine whether or not the specific mechanisms underlying the effects of family structure vary by the cultural context in which families are embedded (as measured by immigrant generation and/or country-of-origin). If this is the case, we will attempt to determine how much of the outcome differentials may be explained by differences in family relationships and dynamics.

PRELIMINARY DESCRIPTION OF SAMPLE

The base sample of 18,502 adolescents who have complete Wave I In-home and Parental Interview data includes 1,509 first-generation immigrants, 2,743 second-generation immigrants, and 14,250 third-generation youth. Overall, 70 percent of first-generation, 75 percent of second-generation and 71 percent of third-generation youth live with two parent-figures in the home. Third-generation youth, however, are somewhat more likely than immigrant youth to be living with a stepparent, as opposed to living with two biological parents. First generation immigrants are also the least likely to be living in a cohabiting family situation (See Figure 1). Although we would like to examine the academic effects of living with two cohabiting parent-figures, small sample sizes preclude this possibility, leading us to drop from our analyses those individuals living in cohabiting families. The remaining 12,579 respondents living in two-parent families (either a two-biological parent family or a married stepfamily) will form our analytic sample. Of these, 1,059 are identified as first-generation, 1,993 are identified as second-generation, and 9,527 are identified as third-generation youth. Although the vast majority of youth in this sample resides with both biological parents (84 percent of first-generation, 86 percent of second-

generation and 79 percent of third-generation youth), a substantial proportion of each generation lives in a stepfamily.

Figure 1: Proportion of Youth Living in Each Family Structure, by Immigrant Generation Status



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