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BOOK REVIEW

Children of Immigration. Suárez-Orozco, Carola, and Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001. 208 pp.

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Children of Immigration is a highly readable and welcome addition to the study of contemporary immigration, particularly the experience of immigrant children in the United States. It thoroughly covers a range of immigrant-related issues from the salience of legal status, to the way immigration changes gender roles and parent/child relationships, to the bevy of psychological adjustments required by transnational relocation. The ongoing research of the Harvard Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation Project, which the wife/husband co-authors codirect, provides one foundation for the book's content, but a multidisciplinary and extensive list of research, plus popular media and more literary sources (such as memoirs of immigrants), are essential and well-integrated complements. Indeed, the use of many accessible and illustrative anecdotes, and the inclusion of specific policy recommendations make this volume particularly well suited as a key issue overview for an education policy-maker audience. Curiously, however, unlike practitioners and researchers, policy-makers are not overtly identified as a target audience (p. 12).

In the introduction, the authors suggest that the book be read as a whole (p.12), then acknowledge that each of the five chapters is intended to be able to stand in on its own. Readers who skip some parts will not get lost, as the chapters complement, rather than build on one other. Although the title of the book implies that the whole volume is about immigrant children, most of the content of chapters 1 and 2, and even portions of the final three chapters plus the epilogue, do not singularly focus on children. This is not a flaw; rather, the Suárez-Orozcos seem intent on

describing the economic, familial, and social contexts that pertain to the experiences of immigrant children, their parents, and the members of the host society with whom they interact. Two themes do seem to persist chapter after chapter: the relevance of “social mirroring” for immigrants (p. 7), and the idea that “the tenets of unilineal acculturation [which historically have guided schooling] are no longer relevant” (p. 160). Social mirroring refers to individuals’ interpretation and internalization of the messages from their environment regarding who and how they are expected to be. From these cultural messages individuals draw the bulk of their understanding of what is expected and what is possible. Whether the immigrant resists or embraces the various messages, the messages serve as templates that frame actions and the meanings ascribed to them. This gets complicated, however, because, as the authors emphasize, U.S. society provides contradictory messages regarding immigrants, for example, U.S. society’s “benign and idealized” rendering of the hardworking, diligent immigrant versus its “vilified caricature” of the lazy and/or criminally scheming immigrant (p. 36).

Regarding the second consistent theme, the Suárez-Orozcos are emphatic that the historical presumption—that immigrant children must abandon their heritage identities in order to assimilate successfully—is multiply flawed. They cite research that suggests that immigrant students who enact “transcultural identities” (p. 112) fare better at school and are mentally healthier than those who embrace “ethnic flight styles,” a full embrace of the host society culture and full rejection of the culture of origin (pp. 103-104), or “adversarial identities,” that is, identities that suspiciously reject the ways of the host society but offer mainly anger and self-defeating courses of action as substitutes (p. 107). Moreover, the authors question whether contemporary immigrants, who are frequently “immigrants of color” from Latin American, Asian, and African Diaspora backgrounds, will be allowed the full middle-class assimilation that previous European immigrants and their descendents were ultimately able to obtain. They also speculate about the wisdom of subtractive assimilation in an increasingly globalized world where the already developed linguistic and cultural literacies of newcomers are increasingly useful assets.

I greatly enjoyed this book and appreciated the authors’ potent summations regarding specific topics, for example, “Many immigrant parents will discover that it is dangerous to put too much trust in an educational system that produces such uneven results” (p. 151). Nonetheless, there are two oversights/contradictions that are worth mentioning. First, noting the predominance of immigrants in urban and suburban settings, the

authors avoid detailed consideration of immigration into rural areas and small towns, even after acknowledging that 30 percent of the students enrolled in Dodge City, Kansas, are immigrant children (p. 3). Like Dodge City, small towns and cities across the South, Midwest, and Rocky Mountains—such as Dalton, GA; Beardstown, IL; Siler City, NC; and Aspen, CO—are loci of dramatic demographic transformation as immigrants flock to jobs in the meatpacking, tourist, carpet manufacturing, and other industries. While these influxes may not compare in net terms to the numbers of newcomers heading to metropolitan locations, educators and administrators in these small towns are largely unfamiliar with immigration and are hungry for the more familiar descriptions and particular advice that this book might have provided. Second, the authors note that educational success will be increasingly salient for economic success in the future (see, e.g., the first sentence of chapter 5, p. 124), but on p. 61 they cite new research by Dowell Myers that notes a general declining return on education for new immigrants (more education does not automatically equal more opportunity and compensation). This contradiction is unrecognized and unreconciled, but it is a key issue worth more scrutiny. These are quibbles, however. In the main, this book provides sufficient orientation to the issues and argues with enough passion that readers will continue pondering its implications well after they have finished it.