New Immigrants in the Great Plains: Strengths and Challenges
NEW IMMIGRANTS IN THE GREAT PLAINS: STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES

Our colleague and friend Dr. Nick Stinnett, a former faculty member at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, is a pioneer in research on strong families. Stinnett is now a professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at the University of Alabama–Tuscaloosa. He has defined family strengths as:

those relationship patterns, interpersonal skills and competencies, and social and psychological characteristics which create a sense of positive family identity, promote satisfying and fulfilling interaction among family members, encourage the development of the potential of the family group and individual family members, and contribute to the family’s ability to deal effectively with stress and crises. (Stinnett 1979:2)

When we began to conceptualize this issue of Great Plains Research on new immigrants to the Heartland of America, we knew we wanted to have a strengths-based orientation. We believe that the media, in general, have done a dismal job portraying families in our country, incessantly focusing on why families fail, rather than on how families succeed. The media have come to the conclusion that misery is a marketable commodity, and the fact that most families most of the time are doing well in our country is not news.

When focusing on immigrants to our country and immigrant families, the focus in the media is also relentlessly negative. We hear, over and over, the countless challenges they face: the challenges they faced in their home country, the challenges they faced coming to America, the challenges they face upon arrival, the difficulties of adapting to a different culture, the harsh negative reaction their presence arouses in some locals, and so forth.

As we know, however, from nearly three decades of research on strong families at the University of Nebraska, there is another way to look at families in general, and immigrant families in particular. In sum, all families have strengths, and all families have challenges. If we only look for problems in families, we will only find problems, but if we are interested in family strengths we will find many positive qualities upon which families every day are building a better life together. Human beings, simply put, would not have survived for millions of years if they did not possess remarkable capacities for endurance, learning, and growth (see Epilogue, pages 335-46, for more on family strengths research).

So, when we decided to focus on new immigrants to the Great Plains, we made it clear in our call for manuscripts that we were looking to create
a more balanced portrait of our new friends and neighbors. We wanted to
learn more about the challenges they invariably face when coming to a new
home, but more importantly, about the creative strengths they marshal in
response to these challenges. We wanted to make it very clear that we feel
honored to have these newcomers to our community, for they bring the gift
of energy and new ways of looking at the world. For all this, we are thankful.

A word on the structure of *New Immigrants in the Great Plains*. The
authors of the articles in this volume address several critical questions:

- How can Great Plains communities make sense out of the migration of the
  world’s refugees to their communities? (Gaber, Gaber, Vincent, and Boellstorff)
- What aspects of ethnic minority culture serve to promote positive social behav­
  ior among young people? (de Guzman and Carlo)
- How do new immigrant families in the Great Plains perceive their strengths and
  the acculturative stresses they face? (Xie, Xia, and Zhou)
- What is the impact of the new immigrant population on small communities?
  How do longer-term residents perceive the effects of the new immigrants in
  terms of community changes, community benefits, and strategies for strength­
  ening multi-ethnic rural communities? (Potter, Cantarero, Yan, Larrick, and
  Ramirez-Salazar; Dalla, Villarruel, Cramer, and Gonzalez-Kruger)
- What are the key concerns of new immigrants and human-service providers,
  and how can an integrated service model be developed to meet these needs?
  (Wirth and Dollar)
- Do the media present an accurate portrait of the new immigrants to the general
  public? (Willis and Fernald)
- How do women from so-called patriarchal cultures adapt to gender equality and
  feminism as they are perceived in the Great Plains? (Dimitrov)
- How do new immigrants meet the challenge of learning a new language? What
  strengths do they demonstrate in this process? (Schomburg)
- What does a successful new immigrant look like? How do Heartland values of
  friendliness, openness, and fairness contribute to this success? (Meehan)

We are confident you will enjoy finding answers to these important
questions in *New Immigrants in the Great Plains*.

—Guest Editors

**Reference**

ed. N. Stinnett, B. Chesser, and J. DeFrain. Lincoln: University of
Nebraska Press.