



Coming of Age in “America’s Finest City”’: Transitions to Adulthood among Children of Immigrants in San Diego

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Background

San Diego is a vibrant southern California city with a large immigrant population. The San Diego site, therefore, focused on the immigrant experience of emerging adulthood, interviewing 134 young adults, aged 23 to 27, who had immigrated to the United States before age 12 or who were U.S.-born children of immigrants. The youth included Mexican, Filipino, Vietnamese, Laotians, Cambodians, Hmong, and Chinese, as well as some youth from Latin America and other Asian countries. The interviews were part of the larger Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study.

Excerpt from Work in Progress

“ For the most part, the San Diego children of immigrants at least recognize, if not follow, the traditional transition to adulthood. ...Examining selected life stories of second-generation San Diegans illustrates...the common choices, obstacles, and triumphs composing the experiences of an immigrant child’s transition to adulthood in San Diego

Dora, a second-generation Mexican American woman, the first in her family to attend college, graduated from high school with a 4.0 GPA, went right to community college, from which she transferred to a local state university and graduated at the age of 21. Her graduation co-occurred with two important events: acceptance into a teacher credential program and an unintended pregnancy.

You have to pass a portfolio in order to receive your degree...I failed the first time around, so that held me back. And then I found out I was going to have a baby. So I redid it during that time that I was pregnant and working...It just, it took me awhile to do that...When I finally got into the teaching program, they let me in under concurrent enrollment, which means you’re waiting for the grade.

Dora’s American father attended some college, but it was Dora’s Mexican mother, with a limiting high-grade education, who encouraged her to attend and further encouraged her to finish college. Parental educational aspirations affect college attendance among their children... By the young age of 23, Dora, overtly inspired by her mother and motivated by her father’s expectations, has accomplished all five transitions, but for a technical exceptions: she has not tied the knot.

Slightly less accomplished than Dora, 25-year-old Briana longs for a career as a probation officer. On first impression...Briana exudes confidence and strength...Born to Mexican parents, both former migrant workers, Briana has cared for her elderly and seriously ill parents while matriculating through an alternative at-risk high school, a vocational program, community college, and a welfare-sponsored education program, CalWorks. By age 19, she had a child by her boyfriend, with whom she cohabited off and on in her parents' home and separately. Because most of Briana's peers, including the father of her child, have been incarcerated, she is repeatedly passed over for employment in the justice system....Determined to shape her next decade...Briana disassociates with all her former peers who live marginally in poverty as young parents.

Interviewer: What's the most important bad thing that has happened to you so far?

Briana: Him

Interviewer: Him?

Briana: Yeah, him. When he got out of jail, my grades went down.

Interviewer: You're going to leave him behind and keep on going, huh?

Briana: Mhm. Ever time I break up with him, I do better. I also do it, I use him as that's my excuse. I've got to always prove to him, look, you could have had this. You know, I mean...every time I break up with him, I try to find something better to do. So I can prove to him, say, you know, 'you're such.'

Briana is self-made: a product of herself. Dora, on the other hand, is a product of herself and her parents. ...On the opposite end of the transition spectrum is Rob, who at age 24 has neither had a serious relationship nor has he ever paid a bill.

Rob has not lived with his India born parents since he left high school, through college and medical school. ...His parents have completely supported him financially and emotionally.

Interviewer: So did they take care of any more than the basics? How else did they support you?

Rob: Oh, wow. They paid for undergrad. They paid for my med school. They, you know, in a way, I feel like I'm too sheltered because they still take care of all my finances. Have a joint bank account with my parents. Uh, I mean, this might sound incredible, but my parents, they would still mail me food. You know, she'd make some Indian food, freeze it, and then overnight ship it. So, you know, just to make sure that when I was busy that I had food to eat.

While many of the youth are not living with their parents, many have not yet established their own "home." Rather, they exist in between their previous home (their parents'), maintaining some notion of an independent future home. ...

Yet, until their children are married, many parents postpone recognizing adult status of their grown offspring. ...Immigrant parents understand the financial reasons for delaying marriage, and many encourage a priority on obtaining an education, but they also expect marriage and children at some point, probably to a greater degree than their mainstream American counterparts.

Ariel: they don't even consider my 28-year-old sister an adult!

Interviewer: What will it take for them to consider you an adult?

Ariel: Oh, God, once I have a successful marriage, making sure I don't have to depend on them anymore because I still depend on them. Independence, I guess, you know.

For the [group] of youth who had children fairly young, the event is often what triggered their movement into adult status. In fact, many ...report that having a child distracted them from a downwardly mobile

path. ...Being responsible for another's life was enough for them to transform and start leading more productive or healthful lives.

Ariel, motivated by the desire to make a good life for her daughter, looked at her situation: she was on welfare, doing drugs, and was engaged to a half-way house resident 14 years her senior, who had spent his life in and out of rehabilitation. Disgusted, she napped out of it and enlisted in the military. By the time Ariel interviewed, she had served four years in the military, and was married to another sailor and had two children by him, was working full-time as a medical assistant, and had just purchased a large house. Ariel credits her grand turnaround to her ROTC experience in high school and to a school security guard who paid attention to her and encouraged her to straighten out. It took four years before these influences resulted in her joining the military, but had she not had a child, she fears she might not have ever changed.”

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