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Who Arrives First? The Timing of Arrival among Young Immigrant Wives and Husbands

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Abstract

Although U.S. immigration policy encourages family members, especially spouses, to immigrate together, it also allows close relatives of immigrants to enter the country at separate times. Using U.S. 2000 census data, we analyze the sequence of migration among married immigrant couples. Results show that over a half of husbands and wives arrive in different years and that the sequence is gendered, with men more often arriving before the women. These patterns differ by country of origin, and years of separation differ by family composition. The findings show that there is a variation in year of arrival within a family, which may impact on immigrant's adaptation to society.

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Introduction

The emphasis on family reunification in U.S. immigration policy and the importance of close personal networks in determining who migrates helps solidify the common presumption that married foreign-born couples typically arrived in the United States together. In this paper, we focus on a previously unconsidered source of variation within immigrant households: differences in the timing of immigrants' time of entry into the United States. We focus on timing of migration to the United States because timing of entry into the country marks the beginning of residence in the United States, and the amount of time lived in the United States is the single strongest and most important factor predicting an immigrant's degree of integration into American society. We suggest that the importance of sequencing of migration of household members lies in the control over knowledge and resources that are available to later arriving members. In this paper, we first briefly discuss importance of timing of migration in the life course for individual immigrants' adaptation, and then consider the possible sources of variation in the timing of arrival among young foreign-born husbands and wives living in the same household.

Prior Research

Early research often assumed that male immigrants, especially young men, were economically motivated people who made the decision to emigrate and that their fiancées and wives accompanied them. Lee (1966:51) wrote, for example, "Indeed not all persons who migrate reach that decision themselves. Children are carried along by their parents, willy-nilly, and wives accompany their husbands." Almost 20 years later, Houstoun et al.

(1984: 919) wrote that with the exception of domestics, women "generally migrate to create or re-unite a family." In fact, until the early 20th century, married women who migrated to the U.S. by themselves without their husband might have faced deportation, while this was not the case for married men who arrived by themselves (Sinke, 2006).

By the beginning of the 21st century, scholars acknowledged that women, who have constituted around half of the adult immigrants entering the U.S. for decades, migrate to the United States for a wider constellation of reasons and that in many situations, the woman's decision to migrate is independent of others' or that the woman is the first or leading person in the family to migrate (see Boyd and Grieco, 2003; Donato, 1992). However, the assumption that immigrant women's migration is tightly tied, and secondary, to the migration of her husband means that the presumption still lingers that immigrant husbands and wives living in the United States arrived at the same time. Blau et al.'s (2003) analysis of husbands' and wives' labor market activity, for example, investigates how immigrant men and women's labor market activities are responsive to one another and should therefore be understood within a household framework. However, the authors explicitly presume in the interpretation of their statistical results that husbands and wives migrate at the same time – even though their statistical models demonstrate that year of migration, measured for men and women separately, significantly influences labor market activity.

To our knowledge, no research has systematically investigated the sequencing of arrival among immigrant adults in the same household and the extent to which the sequencing is gender-specific. Yet who arrives first (or later) within a household has numerous implications for how the immigrants fare in American society because

generally speaking, immigrants receive aid from relatives and members of close personal networks who are already present in the destination country. Herman's (2006) analysis of immigrants in Netherlands, for example, showed that immigrants were most likely to receive aid negotiating the migration process and housing and financial assistance after migration if their social network contained strong ties. Strong ties included fiancé(e)s, spouses, siblings and parents already resident in the destination country. In most cases, women's strong ties were attributable to having a fiancé or husband in the Netherlands. For men, strong ties often included siblings. Logically, immigrants who are able to benefit from strong ties already present in the receiving country — which often refer to spouses — should find adaptation to a new society, at the least the early stages of adaptation, easier than the first-arriving immigrants.

The impact of the sequencing of arrival times can, however, be viewed from another angle. A wide range of research has shown that it is the single most important indicator of adaptation to a new society. Although the exact rationale for the effect of length of residence varies according to the aspect of integration under consideration, generally speaking, immigrants who have been longer in the United States have achieved more in almost every realm of endeavor. For example, immigrants who have been in the United States for longer periods of time are more fluent in English (Stevens, 1999), have higher occupational status (Toussaint-Comeau, 2006), earn more income, and are more likely to own a home than those who have been in the country for shorter periods of time. Explanations for these strong relationships rest on the idea that adaptation to a new society and incorporation into its social institutions require time. It takes years, for example, for most people to learn how to fluently speak a new language (Stevens, 1999).

It can also take a substantial amount of time to enter the labor force and to achieve a position commensurate with their human capital. It can take a substantial amount of time to accumulate the resources required to purchase a home, to learn the procedures for buying a house in the United States and to select a neighborhood in which to purchase it.

Some scholars have also argued that the age at immigration, which is clearly related to length of experience, also affects immigrants' ultimate level of adaptation to a new society. Linguists and psycholinguists, for example, argue that younger second language learners enjoy an advantage in learning a second (or higher order language) that results in higher levels of ultimate attainment in the language even after taking length of residence in the United States into account (e.g., Johnson and Newport, 1989). Bleakley and Chin (2004) present compelling evidence that the lower earnings of non-English language immigrants can be traced back to their age at arrival and its impact on immigrants' level of fluency in English in adulthood. Migrants who arrive before the end of young adulthood may also complete their schooling in the United States and thus do not the experience the frustration of attempting to translate their foreign educational credentials in the U.S. labor market.

To the extent that longer lengths of residence and lower ages at immigration are strongly linked to positive outcomes for individuals, household members with earlier arrival times enjoy numerous benefits when compared to those household members who arrive later. The earlier arriving members are advantaged with respect to knowledge of the new environment. On the other hand, later arrivals may benefit from the store of knowledge and resources built up by the earlier arrivals.

Timing of Arrivals within Immigrant Households

Not all immigrants enter the United States and live with other migrants in adulthood. Some immigrate as children and are quite likely to live with native-born Americans after they reach adulthood. Others specifically migrate to the United States as a fiancé or spouse to join a household headed by a native-born American. However, because of the importance of family-based migration, and the tendency for migrants to form immigrant households in which the adults are all migrants, most immigrants, especially those who arrive in young adulthood, live in households with other immigrants.

Within-household differences in timing of entry may be put into place by a variety of phenomena. Like almost every nation-state, U.S. immigration policy specifically allows the entry of spouses and children of foreign-born nationals with valid visas, and thus allows (and presumably encourages) the spouses and children to enter the country during the same time period as the primary migrant. However, spouses may deliberately choose to enter the United States at different times for a variety of reasons. Some spouses may arrive at separate times because of country-of-origin considerations, e.g., the need for one spouse to finish school or to oversee the disposal of homes and other origin-country-specific capital. Spouses may arrive at separate times because of country-of-destination considerations. One spouse may, for example, have the opportunity to attend school in the United States. More generally, household members may choose a strategy in which the spouse who anticipates better opportunities, economic or occupational, in the United States migrates first.

Among spouses who lack legal documentation, the second spouse may wait to attempt to enter the country until after the first has established a safe harbor in the United States (Massey et al., 1987) and perhaps may wait until after the first has acquired legal status. Alternatively, after the Mexican-American border became more difficult to cross for those lacking documentation, and trips back and forth became more risky, undocumented couples may have chosen to attempt to cross the border together to lessen the possibility of long-term separation.

Parents with children may choose to leave their children with relatives in the country of origin until after they have found suitable employment for themselves and suitable educational opportunities for their children. It is also possible that immigrant parents may leave their children in their country of origin as long as possible in order to increase the odds that the children acquire complete literacy in their native language. If children are left in the country of origin, then one or the other parent may stay with them and so the second parent may arrive with the children. For example, women who migrated from Central America and Mexico work as nannies or housekeepers, but their children reside in their origin of country and are often cared for by a close relative (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, 1997).

It seems very likely that the sequencing of immigration among husbands and wives is heavily gendered. In many countries, men tend to be more educated than women and so have more human capital and thus more opportunities for employment in a new society. Husbands are often older than their wives, and therefore may enjoy more authority in decision-making in the household – or may just be the first to reach a lifecycle state in which migration to a new society is a viable alternative. In most

societies, women bear the brunt of childcare responsibilities. Among couples with children, it may be easiest to send the husband first to scout out labor force opportunities and to educational opportunities for the children.

On the other hand, some countries are well-known for sending a preponderance of women to the United States. The extensive opportunities for well-educated and well-trained women from the Philippines in the health-care professions (Choy 2003), for example, means that it is the wife who is the obvious choice to enter the United States and establish a household there.

Implications of Different Arrival Times

There are several different ways in which adult immigrants living in the same household can affect each others' adaptation to American society: the transmission and sharing of knowledge and other resources, the brokering of knowledge, and the possible solidification of power relations. For example, the first arriving immigrant in a specific household may scout out housing, employment, and educational opportunities for the later arriving members of his or her family. On the other hand, the early arrival in a household may hoard his or her knowledge, or act as a buffer, and thereby slow the adaptation of the later arrivals. For example, an early arrival may act as a language broker for later arriving household members and thus lessen the motivation for later arrivals to learn English.

It is also probable that differences in the ordering of arrival reflects, cements or changes the nature of relationships in the family and household. Spouses who venture first into a new country may do so because of gender-specific norms concerning economic responsibilities and the raising and supervision of children. Those who arrive

first, however, are the first to gain information and experience about the new environment and are thus in a better position to shape the experiences of later arriving family members. Those who arrive first are also perhaps better able to shape the domestic environment in the household. If the male immigrants in the household are more likely to arrive earlier than the female migrants, then the men are in a better position to choose the locale of the home and to monitor the entrance of the female members of the household into important social institutions.

Data

We use the 5% Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS) data of the 2000 Census, and focus on families containing at least two adult immigrants from the same country of origin who are married to one another. Constraining the sample to spouses who are from the same country of origin heightens the probability that the husband's and wife's decisions to enter into the United States are linked although the members of some couples in our analysis sample may have entered the United States independently. For instance, Vietnamese males often first migrate to the U.S. alone and later marry Vietnamese women who are still residing in Vietnam (Thai, 2005). In such cases, marriage did not take place before wife's migration. However, the timing of the arrival of the two spouses in the United States is still a result of the complex decision processes surrounding the decisions to migrate and still has implications for the adaptation of the husband and the wife.

Because we are interested in how issues allied with the decision to migrate are related to the year-of-arrival composition of families early in immigrants' experiences on American soil, we limited the analysis sample to couples in which both the husband and

wife were aged between 20 and 35 and who both reported entering the country at age 20 or older. We also limited the sample to couples who were from the same country of origin, and from one of the eight countries of origin with the highest numbers of immigrants: Mexico, China, Cuba, El Salvador, India, Korea, the Philippines, and Vietnam.

Within each family we linked spouses, and their foreign-born children under the age of 18, if any. The arrival times of the husband, wife, and the oldest foreign-born child who was born before couple's migration are then compared using the responses, measured in single years, to the question "When did this person come to live in the United States?" If all immigrants enter the United States only once and stay until the time of the census, then the year of arrival is unambiguous. However, Redstone and Massy (2004)'s analysis of data from the New Immigrant Survey Pilot, which included detailed queries about return and circular migration between the immigrant's country of origin and the United States, shows that the responses to the census-like question on "year of arrival" understate the length of residence in the United States for about a third of the respondents and overstate for about 10% of the respondents. Unfortunately, their analysis did not include a comparison of the patterns of responses of immigrants with the same household. However, it does seem likely that understatement, the more common pattern, would be most likely for the first-arriving immigrant in each household if the husband and wife arrive separately since the first arrival in the country may have traveled back and forth between the United States and the couple's country of origin to visit his or her family before the trailing spouse entered the United States. If this is the case, then

our results understate the difference between the years of arrival of the first and later arrivals in the same family.

Results

Figure 1 shows the sequence of arrival among married couples. Overall, little less than half, 44% of husbands and wives arrived in the same year, about 46% of the husbands arrived at least one year before their wives, and the remaining 10% of the wives arrived before their husbands. However, these patterns varied by country of origin and by family composition. Although overall, husbands are much more likely to arrive in the United States before their wives, especially Indian husbands, relatively large proportion of Filipino wives arrived before their husbands. If the couples arrive separately, the difference in arrival times is about 3 years whether it is the husband who arrives first or the wife arriving first (see Table 1).

For married immigrants with at least one foreign-born child born before their migration living in the home, the modal pattern is for all members of the family to arrive in the same year: more than a half of foreign-born parents and children arrived together (see Table 2). Like couples without children or with one or more children born after their migration, if the husband and wife arrived separately, then the husband was much more apt to be the first arrival. While the children usually arrived at the same time as the mother, in about 3% of the cases, the child arrived with the father, sometimes before the mother arrived and sometimes before the mother arrived. A little surprisingly, there is a significant percentage of households in which the two parents and the foreign-born child all arrive at different times.

If, however, parents and children arrive in different years, the gaps in the arrival time are slimmer than in households without foreign-born children (see Table 1). On average, if the child's parents arrive separately, the difference in arrival times is 2.6 years if mother arrived first and 2.3 years if father arrived first. The presence of foreign-born child before couple's migration thus appears to shorten the length of time that the husband and wife live in separate countries.

Table 3 presents descriptive statistics for all couples and for the three sequential subsamples of couples: those in which the spouses entered during the same year, those in which the wife entered first, and those in which the husband arrived at least one year before the wife. Comparing across columns shows significant differences between the subsamples. In the "country of origin" panel, the percentages show that Mexican, Cuban, Korean and Vietnamese couples are over-represented among those who arrive in the same year. El Salvadoran, Chinese, Vietnamese and especially Philippine couples are over-represented among those in which the wife arrives first. Indian couples are over-represented among those in which the husbands arrive first.

The percentages in the first panel show a highly patterned relationship between the educational attainments of husbands and wives and their sequence of arrival. Among couples in which the wife arrives before her husband, the wives are more likely to be more highly educated than their husbands relative to couples in which the husband arrives first or the couple arrives in the same year. In couples in which the wife arrives first, the wife is much more likely to be employed than wives in other couples. In addition, among couples in which the wife arrives first, a much higher percentage are older than their husbands than among couples that arrive together or among couples in

which the husband arrives first. The effect of the presence of a foreign-born child is summarized in the next panel. Couples who arrived in the same year are much more likely to have one (or more) foreign-born children in the household than other couples, especially if the wife arrived first.

Table 4 presents the results of a multinomial logistic analysis predicting the log odds that a wife arrives before her husband (column 1), and the odds that a husband arrives before his wife (column 2) as compared to the spouses arriving in the same year. The independent variables include dummy variables for country of origin, whether the husband and wife have the same years of education or the husband or wife has more, whether husband and wife are the same age, the husband is older or the wife is older, the labor force participation of husband and of the wife, and the presence of one or more foreign-born child in the household.

The coefficients suggest a very strong pattern. When the comparison is between couples in which the wife arrives first versus those in which the spouses arrive together, the wife is more likely to have more education than her husband, she is apt to be older, she is more likely to be employed, and it is more likely that there are no foreign-born children in the household. When the comparison is between couples in which the husband arrives first versus those in which the spouses arrive together, the husband is more likely to have more education than his wife, he is apt to be older, she is more likely to be employed, and it is more likely that there are no foreign-born children in the household.

Because there are only three outcomes (wife arrives first, husbands arrive first, wife and husband arrive together), there are only two unique contrasts in the multinomial

model. However, it is still instructive to view the third contrast between couples in which the husband arrives first and those in which the wife arrives first. The coefficients predicting this contrast highlight the gendered pattern. When comparing couples in which the wife arrives before her husband rather than vice versa, it is very clear that women who arrive before their husbands are much more likely to enjoy an educational advantage, they are more likely to be older than their husbands, and more likely to be employed. It is also clear that there are three countries that send couples in very gendered sequences. After controlling for important aspects of human capital such as husband's and wife's relative educational attainments, ages, and employment, and for family composition, women from Cuba and the Philippines enter the United States earlier than their husbands while the reverse is true for women from India.

Conclusions

Our results first clearly show that the common presumption that most young adult immigrant couples arrive together in the United States is inaccurate. More than half of married immigrant husbands and wives arrive separately. If they arrive separately, it is more typical that the husband arrives first but for over 10% of all of the couples, the wife arrives in the United States a calendar year or more before her husband. On average, the gap in arrival times for those who arrive separately is about 3 years.

Our analysis then shows that the pattern varies strongly by country of origin and that it is clearly gendered. In couples in which the wife arrives first, the wives are much more likely to be more highly educated, to be employed, and to be older than their husbands when compared to wives in couples that arrive together or in couples in which the husbands arrive first. Family composition also plays a role – couples with foreign-

born children are more likely than others to arrive together. These results persist even after country-of-origin differences are taken into account.

These results are important for several reasons. It is now well accepted that migration is best viewed as a household or family phenomenon, but previous research on the adaptation of immigrants after arriving in the United States has largely considered the effects of length of residence (and thus year of entry) of individuals in isolation rather than as members of immigrant households. Yet many facets of an immigrant's adaptation may be influenced by the experience and knowledge gained by other immigrants in the household. For example, the first arriving immigrant, who generally benefits from more experience in the new society, may share his or her newfound knowledge about the country's culture, social institutions, and social mores with later arrivals in the household.

Alternatively, the first arrival may hoard knowledge, serving as a broker between the later arrival(s) and American society. It is also possible that processes of self-selection are operating, for example, families may choose to send the best-qualified family member to the United States to scout out the social and economic terrain. Thus arrival sequence may be strongly related to various measures of adaptation to the United States.

The gendered nature of the sequenced arrival patterns is particularly important. In general, the results suggest that the sequencing of husbands' and their wives' arrivals in the United States support traditional gender roles. When husbands arrive before their wives, they are more likely to be older, better educated and employed as the sole breadwinner in the household than husbands in couples that arrive together or in which

the wives arrive first. To the extent that arriving first is advantageous, in terms of gaining a headstart on adaptation to a new society, and perhaps allowing the hoarding or control over knowledge and resources, the gendered pattern in which husbands are more likely to arrive first means that married foreign-born couples supports a domestic environment in which resources and access to those resources are gendered and possibly contested.

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Table 1: Difference in Year of Immigration among Married Couples who Arrived in Different Year

	Difference in Year of Immigration (mean)		
	All couples	Couples with foreign-born child born before their migration	Couples without foreign-born child born before their migration
Wife arrived first	3.0	2.6	3.0
Husband arrived first	3.3	2.3	3.5
Number of cases	14,880	3,770	11,110

Table 2: Sequence of Arrival among Married Couple with Foreign-born Child born Before Couple's Migration (N = 3,770)

	%
All arrived same year	58.2
All arrived different year	8.0
Parents arrived together	
Child arrived alone	7.9
Father arrived first	
Child arrived with mother	21.1
Child arrived with father	1.6
Mother arrived first	
Child arrived with mother	1.9
Child arrived with father	1.4
Total	100.0

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics by Sequence of Arrival (%)

	Sequence of Arrival			
	Both arrived same year	Wife arrived first	Husband arrived first	All couples
Years of education				
Husband > wife	32.0	29.7	35.4*	33.3
Wife > husband	23.3	29.2*	24.3	24.4
Same	44.7	41.1	40.3*	42.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Employment				
Both employed	28.4	39.9*	30.3*	30.5
Husband only	47.0	31.3*	48.9*	46.2
Wife only	4.3	9.4*	3.6*	4.5
Both unemployed	20.3	19.4	17.2	18.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Age				
Husband > wife	63.0	44.2*	76.9*	67.5
Wife > husband	20.0	35.7*	11.0*	17.5
Same age	17.1	20.2	12.1	15.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Foreign-born child born before migration?				
No	61.5	86.6*	84.4*	74.7
Yes	38.5	13.4*	15.6*	25.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Country of origin				
Mexico	56.6	51.2*	49.0*	52.5
El Salvador	2.1	5.0*	3.0*	2.8
Cuba	4.7	2.6*	1.1*	2.8
China	8.0	12.1*	10.3*	9.5
Korea	5.5	3.6*	3.4*	4.4
Philippines	2.9	9.9*	3.1	3.7
Vietnam	3.7	4.1	3.3	3.5
India	16.6	11.6*	26.8*	20.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
% arriving	43.5	10.4	46.1	100.0
Number of cases	6,467	1,548	6,865	14,880

* Percentage is significantly different at the .05 level from percentage of couples who arrived in the same year.

Table 4: Multinomial Logistic Regression Coefficients Predicting the Sequencing of Arrival among Young Adult Immigrant Couples

	Wife arrived first versus Spouses together	Husband arrived first versus Spouses together	Wife arrived first versus Husband arrived first
Constant	-.110	1.100*	-1.211
Years of education			
Husband > wife	.105	.192*	-.087
Wife > husband	.270*	.218*	.052
Same	a	a	a
Employment			
Both employed	.544*	-.005	.549
Husband only	a	a	a
Wife only	1.001*	-.175	1.176
Both unemployed	.345*	-.041	.386
Age			
Husband > wife	-.380*	.517*	-.897
Wife > husband	.445*	-.254*	.699
Same age	a	a	a
Foreign-born child born before migration?			
No	-1.340*	-1.167*	-.173
Yes	a	a	a
Country of origin			
Mexico	a	a	a
El Salvador	.663*	.391*	.272
Cuba	-.601*	-1.458*	.857
China	.203*	.095	.108
Korea	-.378*	-.569*	.191
Philippines	.916*	.090	.826
Vietnam	-.039	-.174	.135
India	-.322*	.227*	-.549
Likelihood χ^2(df)		2,379 (30)	

a Omitted category
* Significant at .05 level

Figure 1: Sequence of Arrival among Married Couples by Country of Origin