Immigration is certainly one of the great issues of the day. In many developed countries across the world, immigrant families account for almost all population growth, and often heated debates about immigration and assimilation dominate political discourse and public discussion (Levels, Dronkers, & Kraaykamp, 2008; Olneck, 2009). Not surprisingly, research on immigration has become a major activity among social and behavioral scientists from a diverse array of disciplines. Their work is shedding light on the complex ways in which immigration intersects with race-ethnic, socioeconomic, and religious stratification to transform cultures and remake societies.

This macro-level trend is of the utmost relevance to developmentalists. After all, immigration has become a major force organizing the developmental ecologies of children and youth, and the health, achievement, and general well-being of immigrant children themselves have become major targets of policy intervention (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Tienda, 2009). What we are learning from this emerging body of developmental research on immigrant children points to new insights about a major segment of the population but, more broadly, suggests many new qualifications of old ideas in developmental science (Crosnoe & Lopez-Turley, 2011).

For the purposes of this special section of Child Development, we defined an immigrant family in accordance with contemporary practice in the social sciences. An immigrant family is one in which at least one of the parents was born outside of the country of residence. Of course, this allows for further variations among immigrant families themselves according to whether one or both of the parents are foreign born, whether the child was born in the host country, and the ages at which immigration occurred for both the parents and their children. These variations represent critical questions in the study of children from immigrant families and are explored by many of the articles in this volume.

Motivation for the Special Section
The importance of studying children from immigrant families and the potential for this research to refine general developmental models represent major impetuses for this special section of Child Development. The timely issue of child development in immigrant families could not be riper for discussion and debate or more fertile ground for new investigation. Perhaps not surprisingly then, we received over 100 initial letters of inquiry for this special section. In the end, 15 made it into the journal. In addition to highlighting exciting work that is going on in this area, we had three additional motivations for this special section that reflect the Society for Research in Child Development’s aspirations for the journal and the field more generally.

First, we wanted to emphasize the importance of international scholarship. Immigration is, by definition, an international topic. Immigration and the debates surrounding it are not unique to the United States but take shape in similar and different ways across societies. Comparing and contrasting the developmental experiences of children from immigrant families in the United States and abroad, therefore, provides opportunities to capture a far richer and more detailed rendering of the developmental ecology and rethink old debates about universal and context-specific features of development. Indeed, several articles in this journal examine children from immigrant families in countries beyond the United States, including other primarily...
English-speaking industrialized economies (e.g., United Kingdom or Australia; see Jackson, Kiernan, & McLanahan, 2012; Washbrook, Waldfogel, Bradbury, Corak, & Ghandhro, 2012), several European countries, and at least one developing region (e.g., Southeast Asia; see Jordan & Graham, 2012). These articles indicate that even when comparing highly similar countries, the outcomes of children from immigrant families often differ due to a variety of macro- and micro-level factors. They also demonstrate how the reception of immigrant children can be colored by race-ethnicity in one country (see the work of several authors studying the United States), religion in another (see work on Muslim youth in Holland; Verkuyten, Thijs, & Stevens, 2012), and colonial and related traditions in still others (see work on ethnic German immigrants from the former Soviet Union and Latin American immigrants in Spain; Titzmann & Silbereisen, 2012; Vaquera & Kao, 2012).

The second motivation was to reflect the contributions of multiple disciplines. As mentioned above, immigration has proven to be of major interest to social and behavioral sciences across many fields. Consequently, it offers opportunities to expand the interdisciplinary coverage of the journal and foster a more multidimensional view of immigrant children in particular and child development in general. What we have tried to do is integrate—different cultures, different perspectives, different units and contexts of analyses. Indeed, work by demographers and economists in this special section emphasizes the need to study the migration process itself when trying to understand the adjustment and functioning of immigrant children, such as the premigration education of parents (see the international comparisons of test scores; Pong & Landale, 2012), the timing of migration (see the examination of the socioemotional adjustment of young children in the United States; Glick, Hamish, Yabiku, & Bradley, 2012), and the importance of migration destination within a country (see the examination of immigrants in the “new” immigration state of North Carolina; Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2012). Not surprisingly, policy scholars focused on the policy context greeting immigrants within a country (see the study of immigrant health and health care in the United States; Ziol-Guest & Kalil, 2012) or differences in policy contexts across countries (see the four-country comparison of immigrant children’s outcomes; Washbrook et al., 2012). Psychologists kept the focus on the micro level, exploring the proximate interpersonal ecologies of immigrant families and paying special attention to identity development, as seen in studies of Mexican American youth (Brown & Chu, 2012; Updegraff, Umana-Taylor, McHale, Wheeler, & Perez-Brena, 2012). Education scholars such as Vaquera and Kao (2012) and Jung, Fuller, and Galindo (2012) examined variations in educational success and the learning environments in both the home and the school.

The third motivation was to examine multiple periods of development, from early childhood to the transition to adulthood. Traditionally, much of the work on the children of immigrants, especially outside of psychology, has focused on late adolescence and the transition to adulthood, but, increasingly, the focus has shifted down the life course to childhood and early childhood, with many psychologists leading the way (Crosnoe & Lopez-Turley, 2011). Thus, featuring research on the children of immigrants has the potential to expand the age range connoted by the term child development while also demonstrating how a firm understanding of early developmental processes deepens our understanding of development during later stages of the life course. In this special section, the child-focused studies (e.g., Jung et al., 2012) tend to focus on basic domains of functioning such as health, social skills, and cognition and on parents’ role in managing and shaping their children’s lives. When studying adolescents in immigrant families, behavioral outcomes come to the fore, including risky behavior, as do other relationships and contexts (Updegraff et al., 2012; Vaquera & Kao, 2012). Hao and Woo’s (2012) study of academic and mental health trajectories is informative in the sense that they track trajectories from early adolescence into young adulthood, capturing the cumulative nature of many early life pathways as well as evidence that whether immigrant youth seem to be doing well or in need of help depends on the developmental period in question. Fortunately, several of the articles in this issue cover a broad age range from early to middle childhood through the adolescent years, providing a nice picture of how the immigrant experience may differ across periods of development (see Clotfelter et al., 2012; Pong & Landale, 2012).

Key Themes of the Special Section

The 15 articles in this special section are quite diverse in terms of subject matter, setting, and approach. They offer an assortment of new ideas and insights. Yet, several clear themes did emerge that cut across many of the articles. In many ways,
these themes are indicative of major ongoing debates in the field at large.

For example, one of the most prominent discussions in the field over the last several years has been over seemingly competing perspectives of whether children from immigrant families are especially vulnerable or successful, relative to the general child population. Historically, an immigrant risk model held sway, suggesting that children from immigrant families were struggling on many key indicators of well-being, including academic progress and health. More recently, an immigrant paradox model has gained traction, suggesting that children from immigrant families are, despite the many socioeconomic, language-related, and other obstacles they face, doing better than the children of native-born parents on most developmental indicators (Garcia-Coll & Marks, 2011). The truth is that the extant literature provides evidence for both perspectives and that, in line with the segmented assimilation theoretical framework (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001), diversity in outcomes related to diversity in sending and receiving contexts is the order of the day. Some children from immigrant families are doing very well, some less so, depending on characteristics of migration itself (including the nation of origin) and their families’ circumstances in their new country (including their positions in socioeconomic and race-ethnic stratification systems).

Collectively, the articles in this special section speak to this diversity in outcomes, presenting a mixture of risk and paradox. Several report results suggestive of an educational advantage for children of immigrant families during the adolescent years and the transition to adulthood (Clotfelter et al., 2012; Ferguson, Bornstein, & Pottinger, 2012; Hao & Woo, 2012). At the same time, Vaquera and Kao (2012) and Pong and Landale (2012) find educational disadvantages for the children of Latin American immigrants in the United States and Spain, echoing similar findings in previous studies that indicate difficulty for children from low-income families from Latin American with lower levels of parental education. Broadening the range of outcomes, several studies observe great heterogeneity in generational differences that suggest that the immigrant paradox is strongest in behavioral outcomes, family functioning, and cognitive skills that do not require strong verbal and standardized test-taking skills. (Jackson et al., 2012; Jung et al., 2012; Washbrook et al., 2012).

A second recurring theme concerns the internal heterogeneity of the immigrant population within the United States as well as differences in the experiences of children from immigrant families in the United States and in other countries. The immigrant population is not monolithic. Instead, it is stratified along numerous socioeconomic and demographic lines and further diversified by cultural processes, all of which create different developmental contexts for children. For example, in the United States, immigrants from Asian and African countries tend to be more highly educated than the general population, which provides a tangible advantage in navigating their children through the health care and educational systems. The opposite is true of immigrants from Latin American countries, although cultural processes that emphasize family orientations over peer orientations help to chip away at some of this disadvantage (Feliciano, 2005; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). As another example, race-ethnicity is a major factor in the reception of immigrants in the United States, far less so in many other countries in the world.

The articles in this special section illustrate the error of viewing children from immigrant families as a single group. As would be expected from regional differences in the push and pull factors that drive international migration, the national origin of immigrant families can be an important determinant of the adjustment of their children, although perhaps less so in countries other than the United States (e.g., Pong & Landale, 2012; Vaquera & Kao, 2012; Washbrook et al., 2012). Many of these differences are due to variations in parental socioeconomic resources, but receiving countries often present very different contexts of reception for immigrants from different countries of origin, providing more social assistance to some immigrants because of political, cultural, and social factors (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). As Clotfelter et al. (2012) show, the age at which immigrant children enter the host country also matters, with those arriving at an earlier age in North Carolina showing better educational outcomes during secondary school. The same pattern is found for the timing of immigration among parents, with parents who came to the United States as children more closely resembling other American parents in terms of their parenting practices than those who came to the United States as teens or adults (Glick et al., 2012). Finally, gender emerges as an important source of variation in the articles by Updegraff et al. (2012) and Vaquera and Kao (2012), suggesting that the effects of immigrant status and acculturation may be stronger for girls than for boys.
Yet another theme concerns the value of two-generation perspectives; in other words, recognizing that understanding the experiences of parents is crucial to understanding the experiences of children, and vice versa. Although certainly true of any segment of the child population, this value is especially true when studying immigrant families. So much of adjustment and functioning of children from immigrant families is wrapped up in the migration experiences of their parents—what they did, and where, before migrating, how migration unfolded, what happened to them after arriving—even if parents migrated before children were born (Glick, Bates, & Yabiku, 2009).

This intergenerational perspective is evident in many of the articles in this special section. As already noted, Glick et al. (2012) focus on the significance of the age at which foreign-born parents entered the United States for their parenting practices. Examining the understudied implications of having a migrant parent for children left behind in their home country, Jordan and Graham (2012) point to the importance of the duration of the time away for child well-being. Ziol-Guest and Kalil (2012) explore variations in children’s health and medical care according to the citizenship status of their parents. Collectively, these articles highlight the importance of considering immigration as a family-wide process of adjustment and adaptation where the migration experiences of the parents need to be carefully considered.

A final theme includes distinguishing between acculturation and normative developmental change in children and adolescents. In early research on children from immigrant families, generational differences were taken as a proxy for the effect of acculturation and time spent in the host country. True estimates of acculturation must be based upon the study of change in immigrant children over time, and that change must be compared to change among nonimmigrant children in order to distinguish from normative developmental change (Fuligni, 2001). Both Updegraff et al. (2012) and Titzmann and Silbereisen (2012) take this approach and show that, despite mean-level differences in attitudes and values, adolescents from immigrant and nonimmigrant families demonstrate remarkably similar developmental trajectories over time. As we discuss below, even better estimates of the distinction between acculturation and developmental change can be obtained by adding a comparison group of children growing up in the immigrants’ country of origin, but these two studies represent novel and important steps in the right direction.

What Is Missing From the Special Section and Where We Need to Go

As rich as the articles in this special section are, reading them together reveals some ideas, issues, perspectives, and approaches that are missing. What is missing here tends to point to gaps in the larger literature on children from immigrant families and immigration more generally. We highlight some of these gaps as a means of encouraging future research in these areas from developmental scientists.

First, the experiences of children in undocumented or illegal immigrant families remain relatively unrepresented in current research. Despite an explicit request for such papers in our call for the special section, none of the 15 articles focus on this population. In some countries such as the United States, undocumented individuals represent substantial segments of the resident immigrant population (e.g., an estimated third of the foreign-born population in the United States with even higher rates when looking at Mexican-origin families; see Fortuny, Capps, Simms, & Chaudry, 2009). As argued by Yoshikawa and Kalil (2011), children with undocumented parents face uncertain and challenging conditions because of the social and economic pressures faced by their parents. The relative lack of published studies on this population reflects the legal and social difficulties of accurately assessing their status. Yet as established surveys begin to assess documentation (e.g., California Health Interview Survey; see Ortega et al., 2007) and investigators find creative ways to include such samples in their more local studies, we will have more opportunities to begin to understand the unique challenges facing these children in the near future.

Second, much of the research that has suggested the paradox of better health among children from immigrant families has relied largely upon self-reports of health and medical conditions (e.g., asthma). With the increased availability of non-invasive biological markers of health (e.g., cortisol from saliva, inflammation from dried blood spots), the opportunity would seem to be ripe to examine whether the paradox holds up with more objective biological indices. Such analyses have begun to be done with adult immigrants, showing complexity in the paradox pattern (e.g., Crimmins, Kim, Alley, Karlamangla, & Seeman, 2007). Our understanding of both the overall health status of children from immigrant families and the manner in which the immigrant adaptation process might shape underlying development would be enhanced by the inclusion of more biosocial approaches.
Third, the focus on the migration process as key to understanding the development of children from immigrant families goes beyond the measurement of parents’ migration characteristics. Many countries, such as those in the European Union, have lowered the barriers to immigration and have created more back and forth flow across borders. Even between countries that have established more restrictions (e.g., the United States and Mexico), migration is a continual process for many immigrant families. Children may spend some time in the host country, sometime in the home country. In other words, immigration is not a unidirectional process for some children, especially those with origins in countries geographically nearer to the host country, such as the United States and Mexico. For example, Mexican immigrant parents often send children back to Mexico for some periods of schooling because they are unhappy with American schools or because children have gotten into trouble (Valenzuela, 1999). This is a process that further complicates ideas about acculturation and assimilation and, therefore, needs to be studied more closely.

Fourth, although some of the articles in this special section are clearly related to policy and intervention, they are most clearly examples of basic research rather than applied research. A more applied perspective is needed in this literature. Certainly, research on educational policies and interventions related to English language learners in American schools suggests how much can be learned—not just about immigrants but also about educational processes more generally—from applied research (Francis, Lesaux, & August, 2006). Furthermore, given how immigrants have been disproportionately affected by welfare reform (Van Hook, 2003), research on the differential vulnerability in the face of major policy initiatives by immigration status can provide insight into how policy works but also about the developmental of children at the margins of society.

Conclusion

International migration is shaping the nature of child development as powerfully as it is changing the nature of the societies involved. We hope that with this special section, we are furthering the study of a significant social change that shows no sign of abating any time in the near future. As such, immigration presents the field of child development with both challenge and opportunity. The challenge is to accurately represent the complexity with which migration may shape children. By meeting this challenge, we believe that the field can develop new models and approaches that should enhance our understanding of the development of all children, regardless of how many miles they have traveled in their lives.

References


