

# Immigrant redistribution and life course trigger events: Evidence from US interstate migration

Gordon F. De Jong\* and Deborah Roempke Graefe\*\*

## Abstract

Our focus in this paper is on the impact of life course trigger events demonstrates that the life course theoretical perspective provides relevant explanations for immigrant interstate relocation decisions in the United States (US). Utilizing longitudinal individual- and family-level migration, human capital, and life course transition data from the 1996-1999 and 2001-2003 panels of the Survey of Income and Program Participation, integrated with state economic conditions and immigrant co-ethnic population concentration data, we apply a discrete-time event history approach to estimate departure relocation decision models for immigrants. The results provide evidence that family life course trigger events exert independent and more robust effects on the redistribution of immigrants than alternative individual and family-level human capital explanations.

**Keywords:** life course; immigrants; redistribution; inter-state migration; US.

## Introduction

Absent from the immigrant relocation literature is the theoretical development and careful empirical analysis of the argument that life course events are alternative family-level explanations to the ubiquitous micro-economic work and income explanations for why immigrant families move. In the United States, where immigrant redistribution to new state destinations has been among the more salient post-2000 mi-

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\* Department of Sociology and Population Research Institute, Pennsylvania State University, PA, United States. E-mail: [dejong@pop.psu.edu](mailto:dejong@pop.psu.edu).

\*\* Population Research Institute, Pennsylvania State University, PA, United States.

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gration patterns (Perry and Schachter 2003), the dynamics of immigrant population redistribution are expected to result from the growth in international migration streams directly to new ports of entry states, such as North Carolina or Iowa, as well as from family and friends engaging in network-based secondary interstate migration to follow pioneer migrants from established gateway states, such as California or New York, to new areas which immigrants perceive as promising better jobs, housing, and schools (Newbold 1999). Life-altering events that may put these dynamics into motion are infrequently considered when explaining why US immigrants move. And in Europe, immigrant redistribution (the secondary migration of immigrants across countries) has rarely been studied at all (Nekby 2006, Salt and Clarke 2000).

Recent research on post-immigration internal migration in the US, based largely on census or one-interview cross-sectional survey data, yields several key findings. First, state and local economic conditions such as job growth and unemployment rates clearly affect the relocation decisions of immigrants (Aslund 2005, Fang and Brown 1999, Newbold 1996). Second, the strong, independent effect of co-ethnic (having the same ethnicity or country of origin) immigrant population concentration on interstate migration of immigrants implies that immigrant social capital has an important role (Gurak and Kritz 2000, Kritz and Nogel 1994, Zavodny 1999). Third, individual human capital, measured by educational attainment and employment versus welfare experience affects the relocation decisions of both immigrant and native workers (Bartel and Koch 1991, Gurak and Kritz 2000, Zavodny 1999). Research is needed to address the lack of migration scholarship on how family life course events trigger the interstate relocation of immigrants. Such research should utilize longitudinal data and analysis techniques to integrate the roles of economic and policy contexts and co-ethnic social networks in both origin and destination locations, human capital characteristics of individual immigrants and their families, and life course transitions (e.g., employ-

ment, marital status, and family composition changes) which create new exigencies that may best be met by relocating.

Utilizing longitudinal individual- and family-level life course migration and human capital data from the 1996-1999 and 2001-2003 panels of the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), integrated with state economic conditions data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics and state co-ethnic population concentration data from the US Census Bureau, we apply multilevel event-history modeling techniques to address the following study objectives.

1) We explicitly model the impact of longitudinally measured family life-course trigger events (marriage and divorce, adding children, getting and losing a job) on the internal migration of poor immigrant families.

2) We test whether family life course events are important in explaining the interstate migration of poor immigrant families, net the effect of individual human capital characteristics and family social capital networks.

### **Life course theory and migration**

The major focus of life course theory is how people formulate and pursue life goals, and how these goals may be enabled or constrained by structural opportunities and limitations in their lives. Life course theory as applied to migration posits that causes and consequences of migration behavior ensue from transitions in family and socioeconomic status that occur over the life course. While the idea that life-cycle stages condition housing and employment decisions is not new, Rossi's (1955) application to migration behavior was a stimulus to empirical analyses, particularly on health events and elderly migration (Wiseman and Roseman 1979, Litwak and Longino 1987, Longino et al. 1991, De Jong et al. 1995, Robinson and Moen 2000, Stoller and Longino 2001, Walters 2002).

As related to younger adults which characterize immigrant populations, life course theory stems primarily from the age-related character of family demographic transition. From this theoretical perspective, a migration event is

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viewed in response to life course events and not explicitly as a social mobility behavior (Clark and Withers 2002). Some life course events such as separation or divorce imply local moves or a longer migration for some family member(s), while other events, in principle, do not imply a migration, such as the birth of a child. The direction of causality in most cases goes from family life course events to migration, although the stress and career changes associated with a migration event may be a stimulus for a reverse causal logic (Mulder 1993).

### **Data and methods**

The longitudinal life course and migration events as well as household demographic characteristics on immigrants are from the SIPP longitudinal panel surveys of approximately 40,000 US households every four months from 1996 through 1999, and 2001 through 2003. The study sample includes individuals who were aged 15 and older and were interviewed at the second wave of each SIPP panel when migration histories were collected. The weighted study sample is thus representative of the non-institutional US population in 1996 and 2001, and their migration experiences over the following three to four years. We focus on 14,760 foreign-born individuals, who provide over 128,000 person-observations based on 12 interview waves from the 1996 panel and nine interview waves from the 2001 panel. Three percent of respondents migrated to another state, 2 percent emigrated, 6 percent left the study through attrition, and about 18 percent migrated within state. An interstate migration was recorded as having occurred when the case's state of residence in a month was not the same as the state of residence in the previous four-month period. For measuring life course transition events, we coded the variable "birth of a child" as "1" in a month where a child aged 0 is in the family but was not in the family in the preceding month or if a child at the first observation has a birth date within the previous year. Based on that measure, we then created a time-varying indicator of the family experiencing a birth sometime over the previous 12

months. We similarly created monthly time-varying indicators of change in marital status (i.e. marriage or divorce) and any adult in the family having gained and lost employment.

Indicators of several important individual and family human and social capital explanations are included in our analysis. Immigrant status is categorized by a set of dummy variable indicators as “recent immigrants” (1-6 years), “not recent immigrants” (> 6 years), and “date of immigration unknown”. Race/ethnic origin dummy variables are fixed-time indicators. A family-level poverty measure is time-varying and calculated using monthly income divided by the monthly poverty income threshold for that family. Having a high school diploma versus having more than a high school education captures an important argument concerning human capital. This set of dummy variables is time-varying to allow for educational upgrades over the three- or four-year observation period of each panel. Months of employment and months receiving welfare are time-varying continuous variables. Finally, family structure, including immigrant social capital sub-family status, is measured as a set of time-varying variables, with married couple families as our reference category in the model. A lag situated these characteristics temporally for correct causal ordering, taking into account the month during the wave in which the designated migration occurred. Recognizing the significance of macro-level structural impacts on immigrant redistribution, we merged state-level economic opportunity and co-ethnic population composition data to control for alternative macro-economic and co-ethnic immigrant network explanations.

The statistical analysis utilizes a discrete-time event history approach using multinomial logit models in the SUDAAN statistical package to determine estimates of migration from immigrants’ current place of residence. An event history methodology allows us to take into account the dynamic nature of variables that change over time, notably the hypothesized family life course transition trigger events, thus accounting for fluctuations that may influence a fam-

ily's probability of migrating. Clustering in the SIPP sample design, including multiple respondents from the same household, and multiple spells per respondent requires a Huber-White adjustment of standard errors (White 1980). We base our results on these adjusted standard errors and include controls for state fixed effects using dummy-coded indicators for each state.

### Results

As evident from the coefficients in model 1 of Table 1, recent immigrants are more likely than established immigrants to move to another state. The log odds calculated by exponentiating the logit ( $e^{.51} = 1.69$ ) indicates that recent immigrants are about 1.7 times more likely to relocate to another state than referent immigrants who have been in the US for more than six years (see first figure in model 1). However, this effect is explained collectively by individual and family human and social capital characteristics (model 2). Controlling for these characteristics also reveals that immigrants who do not report their date of immigration are less likely to move across state lines than immigrants who came to the US more than six years before.

As expected from prior research based on the US decennial census (Perry and Schachter 2003), immigrants with a higher education are more likely than others to engage in interstate relocation (Table 1, model 2). Furthermore, immigrants with longer employment histories are less likely to move to another state. Although this measure is based only on "months worked" observed in the survey, it provides an indicator of both employment-based ties in the origin community and, for some, job-specific human capital that inhibits out-migration. Single-parent-headed immigrant families are somewhat more likely to relocate to another state compared with married couple immigrant families. However, being a sub-family (a family that lives in the household of another family), an indicator of strong family network social capital, is not significantly related to the relocation decisions of immigrant families. Furthermore, the positive coefficient

**Table 1:** Effects of duration in the US, individual and family human and social capital, and family life course events on the probability of interstate migration of immigrants.

<b>Independent Variables</b>	<b>Model 1</b>	<b>Model 2</b>	<b>Model 3</b>
<i>Duration of U.S. residence (ref=&gt;6 years)</i>			
1-6 years	0.51#	0.04	-0.05
Immigration date unknown	-0.15	-0.56#	-0.60
<i>Human Capital</i>			
Education (ref= high school)			
Education < high school		-0.18	-0.15
Education > high school		0.83**	0.83**
Poverty (ref= not in poverty)		0.37#	0.39#
Months worked		-0.03**	-0.03**
Months received welfare		0.14	0.08
<i>Family Structure and Social Capital</i>			
Family structure (ref= married couple headed)			
Single-parent headed		0.34#	0.34#
Single		0.60	0.61
Number of children in family		-0.07	-0.07
Subfamily		0.29	0.20
<i>Life Course Events</i>			
Became married			1.92**
Became single (divorces/separated)			2.14**
Birth in family			0.27**
Lost employment			-0.62
Gained employment			0.11
Lost welfare			-8.48
Gained welfare			0.29

# p&lt; 0.10      \* p&lt; 0.05      \*\* p&lt;0.01

Note: All models control for age, sex, and race/ethnicity of immigrants, and for state of residence economic indicators, stringency in immigrant policy, and co-ethnic population concentration.

for single individuals is not statistically significant, indicating they are equally likely as married couples to relocate to another state.

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Certain life course events emerge as the most significant positive predictors of interstate migration of immigrants, particularly family changes in union status – both getting married and becoming single – and having a birth in the family (Table 1, model 3). These findings take on particular significance because the analytical model is not only based on correctly time-ordered family life course and migration events, but also controls for individual and family human and social capital factors and for macro-level state economic opportunity, state immigrant welfare eligibility policy, and co-ethnic population concentration indicators. Thus, the results suggest that immigrant family changes are trigger events that precipitate the need and motivation for a new residence or to find another, possibly better job in another state.

Surprisingly, however, we find no evidence that changes in employment status or welfare receipt motivate interstate migration in the analysis when we control for family life course events and the other factors mentioned above (Table 1, model 3). Our employment and welfare receipt measures are lagged by only one month, and more research is needed to determine whether a longer lag is more appropriate, as individuals and families may need more time following employment and income changes before undertaking an interstate migration in search of new income sources. The non-significant positive effects of gaining employment and gaining welfare could indicate that income sources may be located before migration occurs. The large non-significant parameter for having lost welfare results from having too few cases of welfare assistance lose to estimate the effect with certainty.

### **Discussion**

The key argument underlying our analysis is that life course theory of migration requires the conceptualization and measurement of family life events (transitions instead of the more usual approach of using family structure indicators) to provide new knowledge about the motivations for



interstate migration of immigrant families. The usual approach in most migration literature is to develop tests about migration causes and consequences in relation to family and household *structure* rather than family life *processes*. The emphasis on life course processes goes beyond the social mobility thesis of migration behavior from microeconomic theory.

Several major conclusions emerge from the regression results in this study about life course and migration events. First, addressing our first objective, life course events are salient predictors of subsequent interstate migration of immigrants. Second, while family life course events are major determinants of immigrant relocation, the immediate employment and welfare transitions of gaining or losing a job or welfare payments are not significant predictors. Third, addressing our second objective, the importance of family life course events in the interstate relocation of immigrants is a robust finding when we control for theoretically important explanations from human and social capital theory and from macro-economic and co-ethnic network arguments.

Why do family life course events trigger the interstate migration of poor immigrant families? Within the context of changing labor market conditions and co-ethnic network population concentrations, family life course events may provide the immediate stimulus to move. As Cooke (2006:2) notes, "migration and the family are interdependent because a change in one nearly always involves a change in the other." Life course theory focuses on how people formulate and pursue their life goals, and how they may be enabled or constrained by structural opportunities and limitations in their lives. As applied to migration, life course theory posits that causes and consequences of migration behavior ensue from transitions in family and socioeconomic statuses that occur over the life course.

One of the social mechanisms that helps explain how life course transitions are applicable to stimulating migration is the life course agency perspective which invokes the concept of planful competence (Shanahan 2000). According to Clausen (1991) planful competence refers to the thoughtful,

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assertive, and self-controlled processes that underlie one's choices about institutional involvements and interpersonal relationships. As applied to migration, we suggest this process includes the capacity to select social settings, including geographic places, which best match the abilities, goals, values and strengths of individuals and families to help them negotiate their life course. Excluding forced relocation of immigrants, our research findings suggest that the life course events of marriage, divorce/separation, and birth of a(nother) child are key stimuli for interstate migration decision-making. That is, planful competence plays a key role in bringing immigrant families to places that better match their new family life situation and goals. These family life course insights, we argue, adds to the more ubiquitous micro-economic work and income explanations for why immigrants move.

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