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CULTURAL INTEGRATION AND OCCUPATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT AMONG MEXICAN IMMIGRANTS ALONG THE US-MEXICO BORDER

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ABSTRACT. This paper investigates the impact of *English speaking ability and age at arrival in the U.S.*, considered as two major proxies for the degree of social/cultural integration, on occupational achievements of Mexican immigrants in two heavily populated border counties, El Paso (TX) and Pima (AZ). Our various empirical findings point out two major tendencies: first, English fluency appears to be the most important determinant of the position of Mexican immigrants on the occupational ladder. Second, early migration to the U.S. appears to further improve the position of Mexican immigrants in the labor market indicating that there may be components of (cultural) integration/assimilation, which we call "Americanization premium," that are not fully captured by English proficiency alone. Although such premium exists, its magnitude, interestingly, varies between El Paso and Pima. Finally, we will provide a potential explanation for this puzzle.

JEL Classification: J31, J61, J71, R1, B52

Keywords: Cultural integration, Mexican immigrants, English skills, occupational distribution.

Introduction

The paper is a brief investigation into the level and type of integration among the Mexican-born workers into the U.S. labor market. Mexicans make up the largest immigrant group in the U.S. and they are integral part of the workforce. As of 2014, as BLS reported[1], there were 8.8 million (documented) immigrant workers of Hispanic or Latino ethnicity. It is safe to assume that a significant majority of them are Mexican-born. These immigrant workers are making 21 percent less than their native-born Hispanic/Latino counterparts. For the undocumented immigrants, the gap is even larger. For instance, Riverra-Batiz (1999) found that legalization had a significant positive effect on the earnings of undocumented immigrants. This may be caused by elimination of the monopsonistic power that some employers have over them by allowing immigrants greater access to the labor market.

[1] BLS' report, *Foreign-Born Workers: Labor Force Characteristics 2014*, can be found at the following link: http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/forbrn.pdf.

The status and unique characteristics of Mexican immigrants, documented or not, have been the subject of many studies. We are particularly interested in their cultural integration/assimilation and the associated economic outcomes.

1. Cultural Integration and language acquisition

Different immigrant groups display different assimilation characteristics. Mexican-immigrants generally rank far lower in the "Assimilation Index", compared to other countries[2]. For instance, in 2007, Mexican immigrants' assimilation level was measured to be only one-third of the Cuban-born immigrants. They also tend to naturalize very slowly. Of those who arrived between 1975 and 1980, only around 45 per cent had become citizens by 2007. The same rate is around 90 per cent for Vietnamese and around 65 per cent for Italians (Vidgor, 2009).

Language skills, along with years spent in the U.S., are generally thought to be a good proxy to measure the level of cultural integration. If English language proficiency is a good proxy for cultural integration, immigrants from Mexico appear to have integrated into American society less rapidly than other groups: only a dismal 49 per cent of Mexican immigrants are fluent in English compared to 80 per cent fluency among non-Mexican immigrants. A half of discrepancy, as Lazear (2007) calculates, could be explained by concentration of Mexican immigrants in enclaves: those who live in concentrated areas learn English less rapidly and obtain less education. This is what Chiswick (1978) called "Mexican ethnic-group effect" resulting in initially lower earnings compared to other immigrants. This pattern is only exaggerated by the fact that Mexican immigrants on average expect to stay in the U.S. for a shorter time period of time than non-Mexican immigrants.

We intend to demonstrate the extent to which cultural integration measured by English proficiency and age-at-arrival in the U.S. determines the status of Mexican immigrants in the job market and, more importantly, whether or not the "return on integration" varies between El Paso, TX, and Pima, (AZ), two border counties with a heavy Mexican immigrant presence. The paper is organized as follows: first, we will study the theoretical and empirical literature that articulates the role of English speaking skills and age at time of migration in determining occupational segregation, and in turn earnings, among Mexican-origin workers. Secondly, we will introduce our data and methodology. Lastly, we will present and interpret the results of our multinomial regression analyses.

2. English Skills, migration age and occupational sorting: a literature overview

There is a modest literature on the effects of language acquisition on labor market outcomes. One of the earlier works in the field was conducted by Rivera-Batiz (1992), using the 1985 Young Adult Literacy Assessment survey, a nationally representative household survey of persons 21 to 25 years old. A reading proficiency test was given to each individual (in place of a self-assessed spoken English rating). The lowest scores were shown by the Spanish-speaking immigrants. However, he pointed out, as immigrants stay in the U.S. longer, they assimilate into the U.S. economy through the learning of English. For instance, for those who had been in the U.S. for 10 years or longer, their English scores were nearly comparable to non-immigrant groups. In the study, Rivera-Batiz found that an increase in English reading proficiency correlated significantly with the earnings of immigrants in general and Spanish-speaking immigrants in particular. Specifically, when the skill gap is reduced by about 40 per cent, the

[2] Assimilation is measured along three dimensions: economic, civic, and cultural. We refer to the composite score here.

wage differentials between Spanish-speaking immigrants and the native-born workers would be reduced by 47 per cent among women and 65 per cent among men (p. 172).

In a more recent study, Davila and Mora (2000) find that English fluency (or deficiency) and the length of stay in the U.S. impact earnings and occupational achievement among Mexican immigrants. As for occupational sorting, they find that Mexican immigrants with deficient English skills, male and female, are less likely to be sorted into executive, professional, managerial, technical, administrative support and sales positions[3]; they are more likely to be employed in blue-collar jobs and agriculture if they are female[4]. Language deficiency causes an "earning penalty" for Hispanic immigrants (the majority of whom are from Mexico), as pointed out by McManus *et al.* (1983). They report that a high-school graduate Hispanic immigrant with 20 years of work experience and a maximum English deficiency would make only *two-thirds* of the native-like speaker with equal qualifications. In a similar study, Hardesty *et al.* (1988) allocate occupations to monopoly and competitive industries to test the empirical relevance of a "dual economy" model for El Paso. They use, among others, *English ability* as an independent variable to assess for effects of sex and ethnicity on sectoral location of workers. They found that although the greatest return to this variable accrued to males (by about $961/year), English language ability is found to improve overall earnings of Mexican-origin workers.[5] Stolzenberg (1990) attempts to associate the place of Hispanics on the "Socioeconomic Index" with their language skills. On average, Hispanics who speak English "very well" work jobs that pay on average 24 percent more compared to those who speak only a few words of English. Conditional occupational assimilation, as he concludes, is caused by gross inequality in the effect of English language fluency on occupation.[6] Moreover, as Kochar (2005) found, occupational immobility tends to be more pronounced among immigrants who do not speak English. This could be taken, in our view, to indicate that short/unstable employment histories associated with turnover prevent these groups from acquiring necessary job skills that would otherwise enable them to move up the occupational ladder.

Generally, recent Mexican immigrants tend to earn less than their more "tenured" counterparts. Catanzerite (2000) found that newcomer Latinos to be segregated not only from native Latinos but also their earlier-immigrant peers. The degree of segregation (or "occupational dissimilarity") between newcomers and earlier-immigrants is estimated to be 23% for men in 1990, with 0% representing complete integration on a scale of 100. As reflective of such segregation, recent male Latino immigrants, for instance, in the services occupations, earned 82% of the income of their earlier-immigrant peers in 1990. She coined

[3] Moreover, a penalty for English deficiency does not seem to differ between border and non-border areas. Among their findings, Mexican American men some of whom are immigrants are found to be making 9.5% less than their otherwise similar English fluent peers.

[4] Those who immigrated within 5 years are less likely to be found in blue collar and agricultural jobs relative to those who migrated 11-20 years ago.

[5] However, the ability to speak English well did not affect the probability of employment in the monopoly sector offering higher wages.

[6] One may argue that the relationship between occupational achievement and language is one of two-way. Expectedly, the odds of speaking English with greater proficiency are lowered by having taken the first trip at an older age (Espinosa and Massey, 1997) However, this generalization should be made with caution. The occupational niche that migrants occupy upon initial entry into the United States also plays a role in determining the odds of learning English. In other words, occupations could be sorted in terms of their English requirements. Compared to migrants who worked initially in agriculture, those who worked in other occupations upon first arrival were more likely to learn English proficiently. So there is a path-dependency effect. This effect may indicate the influence of the workplace on English language ability, but it probably also reflects the fact that Mexicans who had some English ability upon arrival were more likely to be able to obtain nonagricultural jobs upon their initial arrival in the United States. One may also expect that they move up along the occupational ladder as they become more proficient in English.

the term "brown-collar" to represent lower-paying occupations in which Latino immigrants are overrepresented, such as child care workers, production helpers, waiter's assistants, construction workers etc. For immigrants, as Stolzenberg (1990) puts it, foreign birth may delay socialization into American labor market practices, attract xenophobic discrimination, restrict informal job information networks, and create mismatches between previously learned job skills and job skills called for by U.S. employers. Occupational effects of foreign birth are more likely to be mediated through English language fluency.

One could argue that migration to the U.S. at earlier ages may partially (or fully) prevent such adverse effects from materializing. In a study which investigates the impact of age at arrival on various social outcomes, Bleakley and Chin (2010) argue that childhood immigrants with first exposure to English after the critical period attain less English proficiency as adults, and their lower English proficiency, in turn, influences their socioeconomic outcomes. Specifically, each year past age nine, the probability of speaking English very well for an immigrant from a non-English speaking country decreases by 7%. Better English proficiency may lead to more effective assimilation along several dimensions. As Bleakley and Chin showed, immigrants with a greater English proficiency marry people who have a better fluency in English, more education, and higher earnings. For instance, they estimate that more English-proficient people have spouses who earn 30 percent more. Moreover, they are more likely to live outside of ethnic enclaves that may be taken to indicate their willingness to integrate. DeLeire *et al.* (2004) also found, among the Mexican immigrants, beyond age 10, each year of experience in the U.S. is associated with one to two percent higher earnings. Therefore, arriving at the U.S. at the age of, say, 5 or 9 would not make as much difference and age-at-arrival effect does not kick in until the immigrant turns 10.

Immigrants from Mexico, so reports the Pew Hispanic Center, are overrepresented in occupations that rank among the lowest in socioeconomic status, which could be partly caused by their concentration in "occupational ghettos." Our intention is to estimate in the following sections the role English skills and age at arrival, two proxies for *cultural integration*, on occupational achievement in two border counties, El Paso (TX) and Pima (AZ). Our approach is unique in its emphasis on Mexican-born immigrants *alone* with no reference category such as White or Mexican American, the most common approach in the literature.

3. Methodology

We will sort occupations in terms of terms of pay and study the relevance of English skills in the distribution of Mexican immigrants into these categories. We will further investigate if there are any potential benefits accrued to immigrants from a better knowledge of American culture and institutions by migrating to the U.S at an earlier age. For this particular end, we will work with a subgroup of Mexican immigrants who speak English well or very well.

Using our Mexican immigrant[7] PUMS 5% sample for years 2005 through 2008, we carry out a series of multinomial logit regressions for El Paso and Pima with collapsed 2-digit occupation categories[8] sorted out into four *pay groups*[9] as follows:

- Lower pay: up to 25 percentile hourly pay as of May 2008.
- Low pay: between 25 percentile hourly pay and median hourly pay as of May 2008.
- Mid pay: between median hourly pay and 75 percentile hourly pay as of May 2008.
- High pay: greater than 75 percentile hourly pay as of May 2008.

[7] To be exact, the data have been filtered for foreign born and Mexican-origin workers.
[8] There are 22 such categories.
[9] Pay groups do not include the same occupations although there is a significant overlap.

Our sample includes Mexican-born immigrants who were *employed* at the time of the survey and have been in the U.S. for *at least 10 years*. This enables us to exclude those with minimal job market experience and ensures some job market exposure in the U.S., as we do not have any observations directly pertaining to years of work experience.

One of the challenges in conducting quantitative methods in Social Sciences is the fact that we may have to work with categorical variables as opposed to continuous variables. In this paper, we will use one type of categorical analysis known as multinomial logistic regression. Multinomial logistic regression is useful when there are three or more categories to the dependent or outcome variable (e.g. pay groups in our case) as stated by Hosmer & Lemeshow (2000). An advantage of multinomial logistic regression is that it uses of odds ratios as estimators for the predictor variables. Odds ratios are generally much more intuitive. Another advantage to multinomial logistic regression is that both categorical and continuous independent variables (e.g. language skills in our case) can be incorporated as predictors. Our data made this particular method the most suited for our purposes in this paper (Petrucci, 2009).

4. Descriptive Statistics

Variables	El Paso		Pima	
PAY GROUPS	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
HIGH PAY	90	9.1	103	10.8
MID PAY	150	15.2	316	33.3
LOW PAY	610	61.9	463	48.7
LOWER PAY	135	13.7	68	7.2
TOTAL	985	100.0	950	100
AGE AT ARRIVAL				
UP TO 15	340	34.5	359	37.8
16 TO 25	357	36.2	368	38.7
OVER 25	288	29.2	223	23.5
TOTAL	985	100	950	100
ENGLISH SKILLS				
NOT AT ALL	163	16.5	79	8.3
NOT WELL	246	25	236	24.8
WELL	240	24.4	251	26.4
VERY WELL	308	31.3	384	40.4
TOTAL	985	100	950	100

Mexican immigrants; overrepresentation in Low-Paying occupations – resulting from segregation of the labor market along ethnic lines – is more pronounced in El Paso with 61.9 per cent. The mid-paying jobs category appears to be larger in Pima.[10] Although Pima hosts more Mexican immigrants with superior language skills as expected, its "Age at Arrival" composition bears close resemblance to El Paso.

5. English language model: results

What is the relationship between language skills[11] to occupational achievement among Mexican immigrants? English proficiency is the measure of both *human capital* and cultural

[10] This may be largely due to our methodology in categorizing these occupations. Also, local wage data is not available through BLS for Pima County. We have used, instead, wages for Yuma because of its geographical proximity.

[11] As Rivera-Batiz (1992) indicated, only spoken language skills are measured in the surveys from which our data come. We lack data on reading and writing skills.

integration. Therefore, we expect language skills to be strongly correlated with the position of Mexican immigrants on the occupation ladder.

As seen on *Table 5* and *6*, English skills, ranged from "does not speak English at all" to "speaks English very well," appear to be a strong determinant of occupational achievement among Mexican Immigrants. For example, in El Paso, those who speak English very well are almost 1300 percent more likely to in High-Paying occupations than Low-Paying occupations compared to those who do not speak English at all. Similarly, the same group is 80 percent less likely to be in Lower-Paying jobs. Interestingly, in El Paso, every bit of English skills seems to help: those who speak some English (captured by "not well" category) are 40 percent less likely to be in Lower-Paying jobs indicating that those without the basic English skills are generally locked in the Lower-Paying occupations. This is a convincing evidence for occupational segregation based on language skills. In Pima, only those who speak English "very well" appear to be rewarded in the labor market while "speaking English well" does not change the status of Mexican Immigrants along the pay ladder: those proficient in English are 400 percent more likely to be on High-Paying occupations.

6. Age at arrival model with no subgroups: results

We would like initially to concentrate on the role of age at arrival on the distribution of Mexican-immigrants among the four occupational categories introduced above. We have basically three age groups: up to 15, between 16 to 25 and over 25. We expect those who migrate early to display a higher achievement in the U.S. labor market.

As seen on *Table 1* and *2*, our findings indicate a *positive* age of arrival impact on labor market outcomes: early-comers are more likely to be in higher paying jobs. For example, the Mexican immigrants in El Paso who were over 25 when they arrived in the U.S. are *65 percent less likely* to be employed in Mid-Paying occupations than in Low-Paying occupations compared to those who were 15 years old or younger at the time of migration. In Pima, the same group is *59% less likely* to be in High-Paying occupations.

The source of the labor market gains from immigrating at earlier ages could be better proficiency in English as well as a higher cultural integration to American life at different levels (e.g. customs etc.).

7. Age at arrival model with subgroups: results

We would like to investigate whether the early arrival in the U.S. would facilitate a social/cultural integration the elements of which are not captured by English proficiency alone such as the familiarity to American culture and institutions. We call this component of cultural integration "Americanization premium." To this end, we focus on a subgroup of Mexican immigrants who do speak English "well" or "very well" to isolate the premium in our findings.

As seen on *Table 3* and *4* (in Annex), the positive age at arrival effect appears to have partially disappeared in some cases. In Pima, those who were between 16 and 25 at arrival (relative to those who were 15 or younger) are 49 percent and 70 percent less likely to be in Mid-Paying and High-Paying occupations, respectively than Low-Paying occupations. El Paso poses an interesting puzzle. Apart from its direct impact through English proficiency, age at arrival appears to have no positive impact on occupational mobility in this county[12].

[12] In El Paso, surprisingly, those over 25 at the time of migration are almost 110 percent more likely to be in High-Paying than Low-Paying occupations. This seeming anomaly may be attributable to an "experience effect" as the data includes those who have been in the U.S. for at least 10 years. That is, an immigrant worker who has arrived at 25 and been in the U.S. for 10 years is at least 35 years old at the time of survey which indicates that

Concluding remarks

Americanization premium completely disappears for El Paso but persists in Pima: migrating to the U.S. at early ages further enhances the labor market gains from English-proficiency. This is partly explained by a larger concentration of persons with Hispanic or Latino origin in El Paso County, which is 81.8% Hispanic relative to only 33.7% in Pima County as of 2009. However, the "concentration effect" alone does not resolve the puzzle. We need to turn to, what Portes calls, "modes of incorporation".

"Modes of incorporation" refers to "contextual effects" that interact with human capital (e.g. skills) of immigrants and determine their status in social and economic life. It includes three different levels of "reception:" (i) the government's policy toward different immigrant groups, (ii) public opinion, and (iii) ethnic community. The combination of these three reception levels constitutes the overall more of incorporation of a particular immigrant group that, in turn, determines the set of limits and possibilities offered to them. While the government policy against Mexican immigrants, according to Portes, is one of i*ndifference* (as opposed to receptive or hostile), public is found to be *prejudiced* against them. In addition, their reception among their own community was weak (as opposed to "strong" as with Koreans).

The differences in the "perception" of race and immigration status is a significant "contextual" variable and in not uniform across the board. Native-likeness may prove be a virtue in a political environment in which the race or immigration status is more customarily seen as the (legitimate) basis for pay discrimination. Pima can be claimed to fit the latter description. The fact that benefits of language proficiency seem to have accrued only to those who speak English *very well* in Pima could be taken to support this position. Therefore, labor market gains among Mexican immigrants from a particular level of social/cultural integration may not be fixed and should not be considered independent of the overall perception of how much Mexican immigrants should be paid and for which occupations they should generally be considered. This conclusion may have some merit and warrants further investigation.

What are the policy implications of our findings? According to the survey conducted in 2003 by Migration Policy Institute (MPI), the immigrants surveyed deemed learning English "essential" for their success (Farkas, 2003) – which supports our findings. First of all, the labor market status of Mexican immigrants (and immigrants in general) could be vastly improved with diligent public investments to equip immigrants with proper language skills. In the U.S., there is a strong culture of accommodation for non-English speaking immigrants (e.g. Spanish ballots). Although laudable, these measures could possibly delay language acquisition and should be supplemented by additional measures that make accessible opportunities for a speedy language adaptation. Secondly, the government should take steps to lessen the effects of geographical segregation. Beckhusen *et al.* (2013) found that residential segregation is generally inversely related to English language proficiency of immigrants. Mexican immigrants, in MPI survey, feel that it is important to learn English but they feel less urgency. Only 51 percent indicated that all public school classes should be taught in English. This may be caused by the fact that Mexican immigrants are more likely to live in ethnic enclaves and maintain strong ties to their home country. Xie and Gough (2011) calculates an a little over 10 per cent earning penalty from working in the enclaves – which should not be surprising. Lastly, positive changes in attitudes toward immigrants and the institutional framework that provides immigrants with a legal certainty about their future would significantly improve cultural integration.

this group may consist of a disproportionately higher percentage of older and, perhaps, more experienced or educated workers, given that they are also fluent in English.

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Annex

Table 1. Age-at-arrival and occupational distribution in El Paso County

PAY GROUPS[a]		B	Sig.	Exp(B)
HIGH PAY[b]	Intercept	-1.204	.000	
	Btw 16 and 25	-.369	.090	.691
	Over 25	-.268	.231	.765
MID PAY[b]	Intercept	-1.684	.000	
	Btw 16 and 25	-.033	.894	.968
	Over 25	**-1.041**	**.003**	**.353**
LOWER PAY[b]	Intercept	-2.015	.000	
	Btw 16 and 25	.660	.008	1.935
	Over 25	.737	.004	2.090
			Number of observations:	

Table 2. Age-at-arrival and occupational distribution in Pima Country

PAY GROUPS[a]		B	Sig.	Exp(B)
HIGH PAY[b]	Intercept	-.888	.000	
	Btw 16 and 25	-1.216	.000	.296
	Over 25	**-.878**	**.002**	**.416**
MID PAY[b]	Intercept	-.014	.905	
	Btw 16 and 25	-.627	.000	.534
	Over 25	-.514	.008	.598
LOWER PAY[b]	Intercept	-1.904	.000	
	Btw 16 and 25	-.018	.954	.983
	Over 25	-.025	.944	.976
			Number of observation:	

Note: Results in bold are referenced in the text.

a. LOW PAY is the reference category.
b. Compared to those who have come in the U.S. between 1 and 15.

Table 3. Age-at-arrival and occupational distribution among those who speak English well or very well in El Paso County

PAY GROUPS[a]		B	Sig.	Exp(B)
HIG PAY[b]	Intercept	-1.088	.000	
	Btw 16 and 25	.081	.744	1.085
	Over 25	.751	.008	2.119
MID PAY[b]	Intercept	-1.643	.000	
	Btw 16 and 25	.406	.156	1.501
	Over 25	-.708	.202	.493
LOWER PAY[b]	Intercept	-2.154	.000	
	Btw 16 and 25	.455	.194	1.576
	Over 25	-.485	.449	.616
			Number of observation: 548	

Table 4. Age-at-arrival and occupational distribution among those who speak English well or very well in Pima County

PAY GROUPS[a]		B	Sig.	Exp(B)
HIGH PAY[b]	Intercept	-.776	.000	
	Btw 16 and 25	**-1.145**	**.000**	**.318**
	Over 25	-.118	.714	.889
MID PAY[b]	Intercept	.024	.851	
	Btw 16 and 25	**-.666**	**.001**	**.514**
	Over 25	-.512	.062	.599
LOWER PAY[b]	Intercept	-1.892	.000	
	Btw 16 and 25	-.089	.806	.915
	Over 25	-.506	.381	.603
			Number of observations: 635	

Note: Results in bold were referenced in the text.

a. LOW PAY is the reference category.
b. Compared to those who have come in the U.S. between 1 and 15.

Table 5. English Proficiency and Occupational Distribution in El Paso County

PAY GROUPS[a]		B	Sig.	Exp(B)
HIGH PAY	Intercept	-3.258	.000	
	Very well	**2.628**	**.000**	**13.846**
	Well	1.823	.001	6.190
	Not well	1.019	.072	2.769
MID PAY	Intercept	-2.447	.000	
	Very well	.873	.027	2.393
	Well	.891	.026	2.437
	Not well	-.044	.922	.957
LOWER PAY	Intercept	-.816	.000	
	Very well	**-1.675**	**.000**	**.187**
	Well	-.879	.001	.415
	Not well	-.507	.037	.602
			Number of observations:	

Table 6. English Proficiency and Occupational Distribution in Pima County

PAY GROUPS[a]		B	Sig.	Exp(B)
HIGH PAY	Intercept	-2.303	.000	
	Very well	**1.623**	**.003**	**5.067**
	Well	.223	.702	1.250
	Not well	-.826	.218	.438
MID PAY	Intercept	-.393	.115	
	Very well	.273	.323	1.314
	Well	-.089	.755	.915
	Not well	-.250	.386	.779
LOWER PAY	Intercept	-1.609	.000	
	Very well	-.182	.681	.833
	Well	-.664	.165	.515
	Not well	-.266	.557	.766

Note: Results in bold are referenced in the text.

a. LOW PAY is the reference category.
b. Compared to those who do not speak English at all.