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From Ethnic Enclaves to Transnational Landscapes: A Review of Immigrant Entrepreneurship Research

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From Ethnic Enclaves to Transnational Landscapes: A Review of Immigrant Entrepreneurship Research

Anuradha Basu and Sarika Pruthi

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ABSTRACT

This monograph reviews the evolving and extensive literature on immigrant entrepreneurship since the 1970s. It is based on a systematic analysis of 118 key articles published in entrepreneurship economics, management, and sociology journals. Our review is structured into three main sections to consider research into immigrants’ motives for entrepreneurship, their business strategies, and their performance and impact. Within each section, we review research focusing on immigrant entrepreneurs’ personal characteristics, their ethnic community networks, and the external eco-system.

We consider studies of transnational entrepreneurship separately. In each section, we capture the evolution of research from studies of immigrant entrepreneurs operating in ethnic enclaves to those of entrepreneurs operating in transnational landscapes. In addition, we review research on the diversity among immigrant entrepreneurs, and issues of succession and gender. We outline research gaps and methodological challenges in immigrant entrepreneurship research. Finally, we suggest areas of future research by including studies of ethnic community networks. 

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we extend the prior literature on immigrant entrepreneurs to highlight the diversity among them and the significance of their international activities. We believe this monograph will be of value to scholars of immigrant entrepreneurship as well as those at the crossroads of immigrant entrepreneurship, international entrepreneurship, and international business.

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The increase in international immigration since the 1960s, and the 
propensity of immigrants to own and operate businesses in their country 
of residence, has spawned a growing body of literature in several aca-
demic disciplines on the characteristics and contribution of immigrant 
entrepreneurs. Changing attitudes toward immigrants in Europe and 
the United States add to the significance of reviewing existing research 
on the nature and impact of immigrant entrepreneurship.

Immigrants have displayed a disproportionately high propensity 
toward entrepreneurship in many advanced economies. In the US, immi-
grants are twice as likely to be entrepreneurs than native-born Americans 
(Pruthi, 2010). The number of new firms with at least one 
immigrant owner increased steadily between 1995 and 2008 (Kerr 
and Kerr, 2016) and immigrants founded a quarter of all firms in the 
US during 2008–2012 (Kerr and Kerr, 2020). Similarly, in the UK, 
immigrants are nearly twice as likely as their native-born counterparts 
to be early-stage entrepreneurs (Hart et al., 2017). Business ownership 
among immigrants has been higher than among the native-born in most 
advanced economies of Europe (Desiderio and Mestres-Domènech, 2011; 
Pruithi, 2010).
Introduction

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This monograph reviews the existing literature on immigrant entrepreneurship, focusing on immigrant entrepreneurs’ personal characteristics, their immigrant ethnic community networks, and the external eco-system. These three broad sets of factors help to explain immigrants’ motivations for becoming entrepreneurs, their business strategies relating to resource acquisition and markets, and their business performance. In addition, we review research investigating the diversity among immigrant entrepreneurs and their economic and social impact.

There is widespread agreement in the academic sphere about the positive contribution of immigrant entrepreneurs to innovation, employment, and economic growth in the host countries (Musatiele, 2002; Rauch and Trindade, 2002; Song and Ng, 2002; Zhou, 2006). Immigrant entrepreneurs are especially critical to local economies, accounting for more than 40 per cent of new businesses in California, New York, and New Jersey (Kerr and Kerr, 2016). The significance of skilled immigrants for innovation in terms of quality as well as quantity (number of patents per capita and new firms starts) is also well-recognized (Kerr, 2013). In 2015, immigrants founded 51 per cent – 44 of 87 – of America’s startup companies worth $1 billion or more (Anderson, 2016). Recent data show that immigrant-owned firms generate over $775 billion in revenue, $1.25 billion in payroll, and $100 billion in income, and employ one out of every 10 workers (Wang and Liu, 2015). At the same time, immigrant entrepreneurs are polarized in terms of their performance and capital endowment (Jones et al., 2019), highlighting the importance of studying this diverse population for public policy implications for their entrepreneurial propensities and behavior.

Drori et al. (2009) categorize immigrant entrepreneurs into two types: ethnic entrepreneurs and transnational entrepreneurs. Ethnic entrepreneurs are those who are born in their host country and have no prior ties to the country of origin. Transnational entrepreneurs, on the other hand, have a strong connection to their country of origin and may have a dual identity or live in a multicultural society.
Ethnic entrepreneurs, who operate within “ethnic enclaves”, or spatial clustering of immigrants from the same ethnic community. The term “ethnic” in the sociology literature has been used as a substitute for several identifiers such as race, religion, language, shared history and origin (Nwankwo and Lindridge, 1998). “Ethnic” also refers to a specific type of opportunity available to immigrants in their country of residence or host country, in particular, demand for ethnic products and services that are linked to an immigrant group’s region of origin (Kloosterman, 2000; Light et al., 1994; Light and Rosenstein, 1995; Waldinger et al., 1990). Ethnic entrepreneurs cater to their own community’s needs, and rely on their own co-ethnic community for labor. Some immigrant entrepreneurs serve the wider host community’s needs, while relying on co-ethnic labor (Bonacich, 1973). In recent years, yet other immigrant entrepreneurs adopt strategies that involve selling to the wider national market, or even international markets, while relying on co-ethnic labor (Bonacich, 1973). In a further variation of the latter, immigrant entrepreneurs may cater to domestic or international markets, while establishing operations in other countries, including their countries of origin. Transnational entrepreneurs refer to immigrants who run businesses concurrently in their host country and country of origin. They exploit knowledge and networks in both host and home countries for the expansion of investment flows between the two countries (Drori et al., 2000). The transnational linkages and innovative market-making practices of immigrant entrepreneurs are recognized as a crucial element of economic development in both host and home countries (McEvany et al., 2005; Saxenian, 2005; Wagner et al., 2002). Highly skilled transnational entrepreneurs foster two-way flows of capital, skill and information, between their home countries and their host countries. They are also instrumental for inspiring new venture creation and “going global” strategies, especially in their home countries, which tend to be emerging market economies. Permission to photocopy is granted to libraries and other users registered with their local Copyright Clearance Center (CCC), for their internal or personal use, or the internal or personal use of specific clients, provided the appropriate remuneration is paid directly to the CCC. 

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Introduction

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Our aim is to trace the evolution of immigrant entrepreneurship research from studies focused on immigrant entrepreneurs operating within ethnic enclaves to studies examining entrepreneurs engaged in transnational entrepreneurship. A previously indicated need is for the three main sets of factors, namely, immigrant entrepreneurs’ personal characteristics, their ethnic community networks, and their external environment, in reviewing research on immigrants’ motives for entrepreneurship, their strategies in securing resources and markets, and their business performance.

We synthesize the existing body of knowledge in immigrant entrepreneurship to infer the main themes, identify research gaps and methodological challenges, and suggest a future research agenda. A recent review of immigrant entrepreneurship research focuses on immigrants who . . . start a business as a means of economic survival (Aliaga-Isla and Rialp, 2013, p. 821) and ignores research on transnational entrepreneurs. Studies of transnational entrepreneurs have advanced knowledge in research streams beyond immigrant entrepreneurship. Research on transnational entrepreneurs’ motivation, for example, can contribute to the literature on motivation of international entrepreneurship, where the theoretical position of immigrants in relation to born global firms is less developed (Riddle et al., 2010).

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We define immigrant entrepreneurs as majority owner-founders of new ventures. Since empirical research on immigrant entrepreneurship includes self-employed immigrants, as well as those engaged in creating rapidly growing companies, we adopt a broad definition to include both types of studies in our review. At the same time, we excluded articles on immigrant gig workers and freelancers, since our focus is on self-employed people working in an incorporated business. Similarly, we excluded articles on managers of business houses or large firms, but made an exception where articles covered both immigrant entrepreneurs and non-entrepreneurs (e.g., family or independent migrants, or workers) as long as a subset of findings was relevant to our review (e.g., Wagner et al., 2002; Zimmer and Aldrich, 1987). We included studies of diaspora entrepreneurs, who maintained ties with their homeland (Riddle and Pruthi, 2011), and excluded articles on issues of class and migration networks among transnationals in the sociology literature unless the findings pertained to entrepreneurship. We included seminal articles, as well as more recent studies and conceptual as well as empirical papers, to obtain a comprehensive coverage of the literature across disciplines.
Introduction

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The findings of key articles included in our review are summarized in Table A.1 in the appendix. Finally, we discuss directions for future immigrant entrepreneurship research. We identify methodological challenges in conducting research and suggest ways to deal with those challenges.

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