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Economic empathy in family entrepreneurship: Mexican-origin street vendor children and their parents

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ABSTRACT
Research on ethnic entrepreneurship has shown that children of immigrants may experience an economic advantage associated with their entrepreneurial parents’ ‘modes of incorporation’ – the individual, group, and structural opportunities and characteristics that facilitate entrepreneurial participation and consequent economic progress. This ethnographic study examines street vending as a family enterprise and finds that the entrepreneurial, but nevertheless, disadvantaged Latino street vending parents experience economic stagnation. Child street vendors in this study experience compounded disadvantages stemming from their parents’ social locations rooted in unauthorized status, informal work, and stigma, as working together shortens the distance between ‘adulthood’ and ‘childhood’. Yet, street vending also sets the stage for children to develop economic empathy, a resiliency that results from experiencing their parent’s position of oppression that helps prevent an authority shift in favour of the children.

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I don’t really see this [street vending] like a job. I see it more like our responsibility … to help my mom, so she won’t get that tired. (Leticia, Street Vendor, Age 16)

The quote above is a poignant example of the economic empathy that Latino children develop as a result of the mobile street vending work they perform alongside their immigrant parents in the streets of Los Angeles. The children of street vendors, who are intricately involved in the family business, selling an array of Mexican and Central American foods, are keenly aware of their parents’ disadvantaged social location. At a very young age, the children...
develop an understanding of the strategies and attitudes necessary to help parents navigate their precarious position, which includes harassment from the police, health inspectors, and community members. In contrast to the classic narrative of the upwardly mobile ‘second generation’, or the children who benefit from the positive individual, group, and structural opportunities and characteristics of their entrepreneurial immigrant parents (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Kim 2006), the children in this study experience compounded disadvantages stemming from their parents’ disadvantaged social location. Unauthorized status, informal enterprise, and stigma associated with street vending offers these families few opportunities for a pathway to intra-generational mobility. Moreover, children experience their own set of hardships associated with unpaid or low-wage family labour, informal work, stigma, and limited childhood freedom. This article highlights the richness that exists in the children’s experience participating in the family business, and the development of economic empathy. This study uncovers the intergenerational dynamics that result when children work alongside their disadvantaged immigrant parents as street vendors, and the ways in which children understand their social location and that of their parents in this context.

This study is informed and anchored by debates in three subfields: the ethnic economy; the sociology of childhood, particularly the theme of children and work, and the literature on street vending. Using an intersectional lens, this research provides an analysis of an understudied group of Latino entrepreneurs who share a disadvantaged social location as an immigrant ethnic minority who is often undocumented, stigmatized, impoverished, and working in the informal economy. This study requires a consideration of how these multiple and intersecting identities combine to fully understand the entrepreneurial experience of child street vendors in Los Angeles. The findings show that working in the family economy sets the stage for children to develop what I call economic empathy or a resiliency that results from experiencing their parent’s position of oppression. A closer examination reveals that children who work long hours and in more precarious situations have the highest degree of economic empathy towards their parents than children of street vending parents who are not involved in the family business. This research highlights the immigrant incorporation experience of family members from disadvantaged groups, and the importance of parent’s and children’s social location in shaping this process.

**Children’s work in the ethnic economy**

There are a few studies that have looked at children’s work in businesses owned by ethnic minorities. However, the majority of these studies have focused on the role of children in Korean and Chinese family-owned businesses in the formal economy, such as restaurants, Laundromats and
liquor stores (Park 2005; Kim 2006). Park (2005) observed that while Korean entrepreneurs often rely on the help of their children, they do not want their children to take over the family business. Instead, the earnings from their family business provide Korean parents with the means to pay for a good education. This offers their children alternatives to working in the family business within the ethnic enclave economy (Park 2005; Kim 2006). Rather than taking over the family business, these entrepreneurial parents encourage their children to go into ‘safe professions’ such as law or medicine. Kim (2006) argues that the exodus of the second generation into professional positions is achieved in the context of their parents’ social and human capital as well as their legal status.

In contrast to Korean and Chinese immigrants that have high rates of business ownership and are hailed as entrepreneurially oriented groups, other immigrant groups, such as Mexicans, exhibit low levels of entrepreneurship in the United States (Fairlie and Woodruff 2008). Some scholars attribute this to Mexican immigrants’ aggregate low levels of human and financial capital, which relegates them to low-wage jobs upon arrival (ibid). Using 2000 census data, Kaushal, Reimers, and Reimers (2007) found that 17 per cent of immigrants from Asia entered the US with a graduate degree while only 3.5 per cent of immigrants from Latin America had a graduate education at the time of entry. These educational differences translate into differences in entrepreneurial success (Kim 2006). Consequently, and with the notable exception of Cubans, Latino rates of entrepreneurship remain low and Latino entrepreneurs receive little attention in the academic world (Valdez 2008, 2015). This does not mean, however, that Latinos are not business owners. In their study of Mexican-American entrepreneurship, Fairlie and Woodruff (2008) found that approximately 5 per cent of Mexican-American men and almost 3 per cent of Mexican-American women own businesses in the formal sector (2008, 7). However, compared to other Latinos, Mexican-Americans are less likely to start their own business.

Self-employment has been an important avenue for the economic advancement of immigrant groups such as Cubans and Koreans (Portes and Bach 1985; Waldinger and Bozorgmehr 1996; Lee 2002) and has been a key factor in the educational success of the second generation (Park 2005; Kim 2006). Current studies reveal that family-owned businesses can serve as springboards for the children of Mexican immigrants (Valdez 2011; Agius Vallejo 2012) as it has for Koreans and for immigrants in the past – including Italians, Jews, Koreans, Asian Indians, and Middle Easterners (Lee 2002). However, it is not at all clear whether ethnic entrepreneurship among disadvantaged Mexican-origin immigrant parents provides a similar prospect of economic mobility and success among their second-generation children.

When compared to the Chinese and Korean children of quintessential ethnic entrepreneurs, the Latino children in this study are at a disadvantage
because their parents are more likely to confront a negative context of reception within the larger society and a vulnerable social location associated with lower levels of human capital, undocumented status, low English language proficiency, and high poverty rates. Operating under these intersecting disadvantages, many first-generation Latinos and some of their children have turned to street vending as an economic strategy. The Latino children in this study are intricately involved in their families’ street vending businesses, performing work in the street that has been deemed as an inappropriate or dangerous for most children. According to Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht’s (2009) study on the use of Los Angeles sidewalks, ‘children were common participants in sidewalk activities, but their presence became an indicator of disorder and neglect, which allowed the state to intervene in their care’ (93). The common opinion was, and is still today, that the streets are not the proper place for children. However, the children in this study work in highly visible spaces and are exposed to customers, urban traffic, and government officials, such as the police, health inspectors, and social workers, where they sometimes confront immigrant xenophobia and racism.

**Intersectional childhoods**

The families’ economic resiliency is largely due to their ability to make the most of their few resources, such as the labour of all family members, including children. By legal definition, the children in this study are considered children or minors. I build on the widely accepted literature demonstrating that childhood is socially and culturally constructed and it varies in time and space (Ariès 1962; Zelizer 1985; Corsaro 1997; Prout and James 1997; Wells 2009). For example, Zelizer (1985) used the term *useful child* to refer to the nineteenth-century child who actively contributed to the family’s economic survival through physical labour. In the twentieth century, she notes the emergence of the productively ‘useless’ yet emotionally ‘priceless’ child (see also Ariès 1962; Hecht 1998). The notion of childhood that prevails in most post-industrial nations is that children must be educated, ‘developed’ and ‘raised’ (Thorne 2004). In fact, children’s protected, sacred status defines modernity and the dominant view is that school and work are antithetical spheres (Neiuwenhuys 1996).

Divergent meanings of childhood also coexist in a given period of time and vary across space. For example, Invernizzi (2003) found that in rural communities in Peru, the ‘work done by children is much valued and seen as a means of taking an active part in family and community life’ (323). In contrast, the middle classes in the urban regions ‘see the child’s daily life as being geared exclusively to education and play’ (Invernizzi 2003, 323). Hecht (1998) also distinguishes between two ways of experiencing childhood. In Northeast Brazil, depending on social class, children experience ‘nurtured
childhoods’ and ‘nurturing childhoods’. A nurtured childhood is defined as a stage of protected freedom and play and is usually afforded by middle- and upper-class families. In contrast, a nurturing childhood is characteristic of poor children who are ‘expected from an early age to contribute to the production and income of the household’ (Hecht 1998, 81). Nurturing childhoods are common in developing nations like Brazil, Peru, and México, but they are anomalies in postindustrial societies like the United States where children are defined as ‘emotionally priceless’ (Zelizer 1985). Yet, Orellana’s (2001) ethnographic observations of Central American immigrant households in Los Angeles highlight that children who are disadvantaged by race, class, gender, and their parent’s immigration status are an intricate part of family economic survival and that children’s work matters. This study builds on this body of literature and focuses on the work contributions of children in street vending families in Los Angeles, California. These are experiences that have not been theorized about by the street vending literature. The focus has been on first-generation immigrant street vendors and not their children.

Undocumented first-generation and second-generation street vendors

Being undocumented has been a precursor for street vendors in Los Angeles (Dohan 2003; Kettles 2007; Muñoz 2008). None of the undocumented parents in this study immigrated to the US in hopes of selling food on the street. Like most immigrants, they came in search of the American Dream, but found blocked pathways to formal sector jobs that held the promise of a good income and respect from employers. Los Angeles has a long tradition of street vending, but it was not until the 1970s that this activity became associated with undocumented Latinos (Dyrness 2001; Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001; Kettles 2007; Muñoz 2008; Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht 2009; Zukin 2010). Today, many new immigrants from México and Central America are relegated to work in the informal sector of the economy or in low-wage jobs because they are undocumented, educationally disadvantaged, do not speak English, and lack the skills needed to find employment in the formal sector (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Cross and Morales 2007; Kettles 2007; Muñoz 2008; Romero 2011). Poor and working-class undocumented immigrants with no knowledge of English often resort to day labour, house-cleaning, and working for other immigrants. (Illegal) street vending is one of the few and usually last options available (Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001; Dohan 2003; Muñoz 2008; Zukin 2010). It was not always illegal to street vend in Los Angeles. The criminalization of street vending took place at the turn of the twentieth century, as the city became more Anglicized (Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001; Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht 2009).
Today, street vending continues to be an illegal activity\(^3\) enforced by the Los Angeles Health Department (LAHD) and Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) (Kettles 2004; Rosales 2013).\(^4\)

Most of the children of street vendors in this study are not undocumented. However, being a member of a ‘mixed-status’ household has real life implications for all family members including those who are US citizens or legal residents (Estrada 2013). Menjivar and Abrego (2014) use the term legal violence to refer to the ways in which the law may ‘potentially obstruct or derail immigrant’s path of incorporation’ (1383). This is important to note because legal status determines access to employment and education among many other services (Abrego 2006). In her study of immigrant families, Abrego (2014) found that children who were US citizens experienced ‘illegality’ in diverse ways even when they were not the direct targets of these laws. Many of these children found it difficult, stressful, and painful to keep the status of their family members a secret. In addition, children with citizenship felt guilty when they enjoyed luxuries such as driving or pursuing higher education when their undocumented siblings could not. Lack of citizenship limited the possibilities for upward mobility.

This study shows that under unequal structural conditions associated with legal status, many undocumented Latinos resort to the informal economy. The multiple intersections of oppression that pushes first-generation immigrants to work as street vendors also spills over to their US-born children. As an economic family strategy, the children of street vendors learn to labour side by side with their immigrant parents. Under these circumstances, the children in this study are not just adopting an immigrant narrative (Agius Vallejo and Lee 2009) from their parent’s harsh working conditions, but they are developing an economic empathy that derives from a shared struggle that exposes US-born children to their undocumented parents’ labour struggles. The development of an economic empathy or resiliency associated with the harsh conditions of work witnessed and experienced by child street vendors provides a nuanced understanding of the relationship between unequal structural conditions, disadvantage, and work among the second generation that can also provide insight into other informal and semi-formal immigrant occupations such as domestic, farm, and landscaping where children are also known to work with their parents.

**Methodology**

After receiving Institutional Review Board approval, I immersed myself in the social world of immigrant vendors in Los Angeles for two-and-a-half years and conducted a total of sixty-six in-depth interviews with children and parent street vendor families. This research was conducted in two stages. The first stage was from May 2008 to May 2009. The second stage was from December
2010 to May 2012. I conducted research at two different street vending sites that I call *La Cumbrita* and *El Callejon* in Boyle Heights, a small ‘Mexican barrio’ in East Los Angeles with a population that is 94 per cent Latino. These sites offered local community members affordable food and an ephemeral space that resembled a Mexican plaza where mostly Latino families socialized on the weekend nights.

I conducted observations around the street corner vending sites while children between the ages of 10 and 18 worked alongside their parents or on their own. My observations took place on the weekends or evenings when children were off school and available to street vend with their parents. At first, I blended in with the other customers and stood along the sidewalk eating food from paper plates or comfortably sitting on folding chairs arranged in front of a small television provided by one of the street vendors. Later, I helped the families by running errands to the store. I also cut fruit and assisted customers while the children took bathroom breaks or socialized with their cousins and friends. I gained the trust of the families who invited me into their homes and to various social events. However, I was never left in charge of money transactions. That was a task restricted to family members.

I also shadowed five families in many social settings for two months. I spent a great deal of time with them in their homes and while they street vended. These observations provided data on social interactions and decision-making made at the workplace and at home. As Goffman (1989) recommended, I subjected myself to their life circumstances. I felt nervous and scared at the realization that the police might issue citations or actually arrest us for vending. For several moments I experienced fear while on the site, but these fears were temporarily and situational, since I could leave the vending area at any time. In addition, my education, US citizenship, and a relatively steady employment at the university privileged me with extended layers of protection that my respondents did not have even after they left the street vending site.

I recruited most of my interview respondents while they worked. I only included families who primarily sold food that required preparation at home. Some interviews were conducted on the street while respondents worked. Additional interviews with family members took place typically at their homes. I also spent time in the field with my respondents before and after I interviewed them. Since I interviewed various family members, I purposely tried to schedule the interviews on separate days in order to spend more time with them at home or while they street vended. I took field notes during and after all of these interactions.

From May 2008 to May 2009, I interviewed twenty children between the ages of 10 and 18 and three parents. From December 2010 to May 2012, I interviewed fifteen street vending families in order to obtain a detailed family portrait of each. For each family, I interviewed at least one child and
one parent, usually the mother. I also interviewed a small group of five street vendor parents whose children did not work with them. The total sample consists of 66 respondents, including the comparison sample. I interviewed a total of 43 children (38 who work with their parents and 5 who did not). Forty children were between the ages of 10 and 18 and three were older than 18. Two were 21 years old and one had just turned 23 when I interviewed her. They were included in the sample because they had been street vending with their family since the age of 5. Five of the youth interviewed had graduated high school and were not enrolled in college when I interviewed them. The rest were in school and three were enrolled in private tuition-based Catholic schools. The sample was not equally distributed by gender; only eleven of the youth interviewed were boys. This was also true for the parents I interviewed. I interviewed fifteen mothers and three fathers. My time in the field revealed that more girls were engaged in this type of activity (for more on this gender analysis, read Estrada and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2013). All of the youth’s parents were undocumented with the exception of three parents who were legal residents. In contrast, the majority of the children (thirty-three out of forty-three) were born in the US and the rest immigrated with their parents at a very young age (for more on citizenship see Estrada 2013). The average educational level of the parents was the sixth grade and all were monolingual Spanish speakers.

Findings

Street vendors in Los Angeles and their families engage in diverse work arrangements. While some work as a family unit, others do not. In this section, I provide an overview of the various ways in which kids are involved in the street vending business. Then, I show the process and the conditions by which children who work with their parents develop economic empathy towards their parents. I also provide insight into the lives of the children of street vendors who are not involved in the family business. The children who do not work with their parents, resent their parent’s street vending work and develop a stance that rejects this form of work and neglects to consider the structural conditions that lead their parents to engage in this illegal and often stigmatizing labour. Finally, I show different forms of intergenerational tensions that result among these street vending families where children are conflicted with what they rationalize to be a responsibility to help their parents and their desire to enjoy a ‘normal’ childhood.

The work street vending kids do

Similarly to Orellana’s (2001) ethnographic observations of Central American immigrant households, I found that a lot of the work done by street
vending children takes place in the privacy of their own homes. For example, at home some children cooked the food, made salsas, and bagged peanuts and churros. The also nicely stacked the merchandise (bottled beverages) along the walls of their small apartments and kept an inventory of these items. But the work that street vending children do is not limited to the private sphere of the home as the majority of children are also in the front lines interacting with customers, taking orders, and conducting cash transactions, as well as cutting fruit, making tortillas, and preparing a variety dishes at the vending site. The majority of the children street vend side by side with their parents and their older siblings (i.e. age 13); that is, they are in charge of their own street vending stand. The decision to begin working alone usually happens organically. Either the older child decides that he or she is ready to street vend alone or older siblings make the decision for them. During my interview with 18-year-old Norma, she explained how her 13-year-old sister got assigned to her own stand selling freshly squeezed orange juice when her family was contemplating hiring help. Norma explained:

I told my dad not to look for anyone. Johanna [13 year old sister] is old enough. She can take my place and I will go help you and mom. … That extra money that you [father] are paying will stay here with us for anything that we need … And well, I continued helping them and my sister started working at my previous stand. Everyone has their own stand now. (Norma, Street Vendor, Age 18)

Such street vending arrangements vary according to the age and gender of the child. In the case of daughters operating a vending stand independently, parents positioned their own stands in close proximity, as was the case with Johanna. This practice assured that parents were able to maintain eye contact and vigilance over their daughters (see Estrada and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2013).

Being on the front line in an occupation that is perceived by some customers and local authorities as ‘immigrant work’, ‘too Mexican’, anachronistic, and ‘illegal’, exposed the children to their parents’ stress, stigma, and discrimination. While children and parents do not share similar characteristics, such as US citizenship and English language skills, the children are automatically stereotyped as illegal immigrants and frequently told to go back to Mexico. During my interview with Veronica, she recalled a series of times when random people, the police, and even her own peers called her derogatory xenophobic names while street vending. She explained:

People look at you (turns to me with a staring-down gaze that depicts contempt in order to illustrate how some people passing by look at her) and you have to tell them to buy your stuff! [Veronica pauses and then resumes to share a specific memory] So they [people passing by] were making fun of me, like, saying that I’m right here in the street, like a Mexican person selling in the streets. So they told me, ‘Ha! [pointing in mockery] You’re a wetback!’ (Veronica, Street Vendor, Age 18)
Veronica was born in the US, was a community college student, spoke fluent English, and had never visited Mexico. However, when street vending, her identity was aligned to that of an undocumented Mexican immigrant. Young street vendors such as Veronica tried to brush off such xenophobic comments. Veronica said, ‘I wanted to cry because they were making fun of me, but then I got over it.’ Later in the interview, she commented with dismay, ‘This is what my mom and dad have to put up with every single day.’ Veronica’s parents, like the majority of the parents in this study (fifteen out of eighteen), were undocumented. In interview after interview, children echoed a similar statement made by 12-year-old Esmeralda. ‘My mom can’t work [elsewhere] because she doesn’t have papers.’ Constrained by their parent’s lack of work opportunities, children not only recognized that parents were working as street vendors to give them a better life, but the children also worked to make life better for their parents.

**Economic empathy**

The children who worked with their parents developed an empathetic stance toward their parents that I call economic empathy, a resiliency that results from experiencing their parent’s position of oppression. I found that economic empathy developed as a result of working together and having shared work struggles. Most children who worked with their parents saw this activity as their responsibility to help relieve some of their parent’s burden. Leticia defined the work she did with her parents as her responsibility.

> I don’t really see this like a job. I see it more like our [Leticia and her siblings] responsibility. Like I have to be there to help my mom, so she won’t get that tired. (Leticia, Street Vendor, Age 16)

Similarly to Leticia, 17-year-old Clara expressed in an emotional tone of voice, ‘we feel my mom’s pain for working’. Clara and her mother sell fresh cut-up fruit on a popular street in Boyle Heights. Many times she has helped her mother hide their wares and fruit behind parked cars in the parking lot during police raids. These moments help Clara value her mom’s work and the risks involved.

Working children like Leticia and Clara were more mindful of how they spent the money they received from selling on the street. When they did not save the money, they characterized themselves as ‘wasting it’. When I asked Alejandro what he did with the money he received from his parents he told me, ‘I save it up, I save it up. Everything that she gives me I try to save it up. Unless I’m really hungry or something, I waste it. But most of the time I eat here.’ Fourteen-year-old Amanda also told me she saved her money. She saves her hard-earned money in a box inside her clothing drawer. She confessed to wanting to use her money for toys, but frequently
loaned her mom money to buy food for the business. At a young age, she realized that helping her mother was more important than indulging in material things, like toys.

Parents also expressed closer affinity with the children who worked with them. The parents emphasize that this type of empathy was the result of working together and sharing the common struggle of running from the cops and selling in all kinds of weather. Take the case of Nilda and her fourteen-year-old daughter Linda. Despite having two older brothers, Linda is the only one who helps her mother street vend. One son is Linda’s twin and the other is 18 years old. During my interview with Nilda, she distinguished between the relationships she had with her kids. She is more attached to Linda and attributed this attachment to gender but emphasized the fact that they worked together. Nilda said that her relationship with her children, especially her daughter, would be different if she worked in the formal sector because they would not witness her struggle.

She [my daughter] is living what I am doing. She knows, for example, Linda knows that I get tickets [citations], about the police, [having to work in] the rain, the water, everything. All of my kids [her two sons] also know about this, but they don’t live it.

… My relationship with Linda is more of attachment (apegamiento). What happens is that she is a girl and I have more trust (confianza) in her for everything. And with my sons, we talk less. They are less attached to me. Why? For the same reasons … They don’t interact (conviven) with me. (Nilda, Street Vendor, Mother)

Nilda reiterates that interaction and spending time together at work helps create not only empathy, but economic empathy. Similarly, another street vending parent explained:

When they [our children] realize how we earn our money, it is difficult for them to take the wrong path. Because they say ‘my dad or my mom work hard to earn money and how could I waste it.’ (Hector, Street Vendor, Father)

This describes the reaction of the youth who worked with their parents. They work hard with their parents and have a greater appreciation for their parents and the money they earn. Seventeen-year-old Clara makes this point by contrasting herself to her friends that do not work:

I would like people to come here and see that it is not easy. We see my mom suffer. I see friends that don’t do anything. They go shopping. ‘Dude, while you’re shopping I’m working my ass off over here.’ A lot of people make fun of my mom or me, but if they only knew. Then they would be saying ‘don’t buy me this don’t buy me that’. I think it [my relationship with my mother] is special. (Clara, Street Vendor, Age 17)
In our current consumer age, sociologist Pugh (2009) reminds us that childhoods have become more commercialized where children in the US want too many material things. The children in this study, who experienced what Hecht (1998) calls ‘nurturing’ type of childhood, also desire many material things such as toys, clothes, and trips to theme parks. However, I found that they hold back on expressing their desires because their ‘nurturing childhood’ experience prompted them to develop an economic empathy towards their parents as a result of their shared work experience and sacrifices.

Rejection of parental work

I only observed economic empathy develop among the children who worked with their parents and had first-hand experience of the difficulty of earning a living doing street vending work. This finding is based on comparison data collected from five families with children not working alongside them and with interview data from street vending youth who spoke about their siblings, cousins, or friends who did not street vend with their parents. Working children often compared their lives with other children who experienced what Hecht (1998) called ‘nurtured’ childhoods. Paradoxically, the children who had developed an empathetic stance toward their street vending parents, also developed a very critical and chastising stance toward their non-working peers.

Fourteen-year-old Linda compared herself with her cousin of the same age who did not help her aunt sale tamales. Linda describes the difference as follows:

I learn to understand my mom. When one of my aunts started losing days at work, like my cousin wouldn’t understand. She would want to do the same things when her mom couldn’t afford it anymore. So it’s like, I learn to understand that when my mom has money, I feel comfortable asking my mom, ‘can you buy me this?’ But when I know, like the sales didn’t go good, I won’t ask her [my mom] for money. (Linda, Street Vendor, Age 14)

Similarly to Linda, Josefina (age 16) also had a cousin who did not work with her street vending parents. Josefina expressed frustration over her cousin’s lack of support and economic empathy towards her aunt. During our interview she said, ‘My cousin takes everything for granted.’ She told me her cousin asked her mom for money even if she knew sales were slow. She expressed economic empathy when she added, ‘My aunt would bust her butt and everything and my cousin […] just doesn’t care.’ Josefina contrasted her experience with that of her cousins this way:

I try to look for things I like and I ask myself, ‘Do I really need them?’ … I look for specials and everything and my cousin […] just like makes her mom make food every night. Like [my aunt] barely gets sleep and [my cousin] doesn’t care. It
came to a point where my aunt hired me to come help her every night. And you know, having a daughter. We are the same age. I’m four months older than her. (Josefina, Street Vendor, Age 16)

Intrigued by Josefina’s assessment of her cousin, I requested an interview and included Angela (age 16) in my comparison group. Although Angela agreed participate in the study, the interview was very short (about 15 minutes long). She had very little interest in her mother’s street vending business and mostly shrugged her shoulders, followed by an ‘I don’t know’ to questions pertaining to her mom’s street vending business. Similar to other children who did not street vend with their parents, Angela told me it was her mother’s decision to street vend and not hers. She also spent a lot of her free time with her father who had re-married and lived in Pasadena. Being removed from her mother’s daily struggle prevented her from developing the same level of economic empathy like the one her next door neighbour cousin had developed.

The lack of economic empathy in the comparison group did not mean that the non-working children did not love their parents. However, the youth in this group were removed from their parents’ street vending struggles and felt embarrassed of their work. Ignoring the social structures that pushed their parents to street vending work contributed to the lack of an empathetic stance, which is useful for countering the stigma associated with street vending. They did not understand how difficult it was to find employment and the sacrifices required to earn money street vending. Non-working children often developed a level of resentment towards their parents for ‘choosing’ to work as street vendors. Some could not understand why their parents could not get a ‘normal’ job instead. Take the case of 14-year-old Betty as an example. Betty did not work with her mother and she was embarrassed that her mother was a street vendor (see Estrada and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2011). She wanted her mother to get a ‘normal’ job cleaning houses, as a janitor or distributing newspapers. Betty perceived these service sector jobs favourable alternatives to street vending. When I interviewed Betty in the kitchen of her family’s small two-bedroom apartment, she was eating a cup of instant noodles. Her mother had left tamales that morning for both of us to eat. Betty made a face of disgust and said she was tired of tamales and preferred to eat noodles. Later in the interview, I asked Betty if she saved money from her allowance. She responded with a cutting ‘no’. ‘Why don’t you save money?’ I asked. ‘Usually I just spend it all. I just don’t save it,’ replied Betty. Unlike the youth who worked with their parents, Betty was very detached from her mother’s work. When I asked her what she liked about her mother’s work she replied ‘Nothing. Nothing. I’m tired of it. It’s her decision to sell them [tamales] ‘cause we need money.’ Instead of feeling empathy towards her mother, she expressed frustration and saw it as her mother’s decision to do this type of work to support her and her two sisters.
Intergenerational tensions

I saw that lack of economic empathy lead to greater tensions in various families. Non-working children endure greater tensions and stress at home with their parents. In contrast, working children formed greater bonds with their parents. For example, Miriam’s mother Mercedes, who is a street vender, sells tamales in the morning from 4:00 am to 7:00 am. I went street vending with her several times in the morning while her daughters stayed home. Mercedes constantly complained about her daughter’s lack of support and worried about leaving them unsupervised home alone. Fifty-year-old Alondra had a similar work schedule as Mercedes. She also left her three daughters at home alone while she sold her tamales in the mornings and on weekends. She worried for her teenage daughters especially because she had a suspicion that her oldest daughter snuck her boyfriend inside the house when she was out street vending. Her suspicions were true. Months later after I interviewed her, she told me she was going to be a grandmother. ‘Felicitades [congratulations]’, I replied after she shared the news. ‘Que felicidades ni que nada. Estoy tan enojada con ella. Yo aquí fregándome para que me paguen así. [Don’t congratulate me. I am very mad at her. I am here working hard and this is how they re-pay me].’

Working children in my study also complained about working too much. They saw their working as stealing their youth or their childhood, yet they quickly rationalized their work as a family obligation. Patricia said:

I think there is a limit, because you know, we are young and we wanna like, have a normal childhood experience yet she remains optimistic that she will enjoy her teenage

Seventeen-year-old Leticia posted a similar sentiment on her Facebook page. In her poetic post, she bridges the nurtured and nurturing childhood frameworks (Hecht 1998) showing that expectations to contribute to the household and fulfilling her ‘teenage dream’ are situational and contextual. Here is the excerpt posted on 16 January 2012:

I Work Too MUCH To Be 17,
I Sleep Little & Dnt Get Tired Caause I’m YOUNG,
I Have Never Had A Normal Teenage Life,
Buut I Guess That’s Whaat Maakes My Life So Unique , & So Full Of Adventuress , Sad /Mad/Happy/Unforgettable. Memories That Shall Last Forever:
There’s Alway’s Time For The TeenageDream♥

This was the first time that I noticed Leticia complaining about her work. In this poem, she acknowledges that her life is different from a normative childhood experience yet she remains optimistic that she will enjoy her teenage
dream in the future. Leticia had taken on many responsibilities in the previous month when her mother suffered a stroke and was hospitalized for nearly two months. As a result from her mother’s illness, Leticia took additional responsibilities in the household and continued street vending to keep supporting the family. Leticia solicited the help of two of her high school friends. Together with the help of other street vending friends, she continued selling on the weekend and on selected weekdays during her mother’s illness.

Other respondents also complained about not having time to go out with friends because they had to work. For example, Josefina complained about not being able to go out with her friends to the movies or to Disneyland. These social outings with her friends often clashed with the time she worked on the weekend. During our interview, she explained:

Sometimes it sucks because, I mean, I do give up a lot of things. Like, there are times that my friends are like ‘oh let’s go to the movies’ and I be like, ‘no’… We finish [street vending] at five, so like after six I could go. My mom would give me permission, but they always want to go early. Last week they invited me to Disneyland but I’m like ‘no I can’t go because I have to help my mom’. My sister wasn’t here to help her and then my stepdad goes to work somewhere else so I’m like ‘how is she gonna work with two kids?’ and then I’m all like no. But I have given up stuff, but, I mean, I guess I have to. (Josefina, Street Vendor, Age 16)

Josefina was very mature and felt responsible for helping her mother. She did not see herself going to the movies or to Disneyland while her mother worked alone. These types of conflicts with her work and her social life created tensions between daughter and mother. Josefina was allowed to go out with friends after work, but after work hours was typically too late for her friends.

**Summary**

This study contributes to our understanding of the experiences of Latino children in Los Angeles and their parents who engage in informal street vending entrepreneurship. This article moves beyond the classic theory of ethnic entrepreneurship that highlights the success of certain ethnic entrepreneurs crediting essential ethnic characteristics. Previous research has generally stressed the importance of ethnicity and in doing so, neglected the ethnic group’s position in relationship to citizenship and legal status, class, and human capital. The experiences of Latino street vendors and their children working with them are explained through an intersectional lens considering the families’ unauthorized status, informal work, and stigmatized labour, which create a unique set of opportunities and challenges. The children in this study experience their own set of disadvantages that lie within their own social location and in the intersection of: informal work, stigma, and limited childhood freedom. Hecht’s concept of nurturing and nurtured
childhoods provides a useful way of thinking about street vending children in Los Angeles. Children in this study hence experience both nurtured and nurturing childhoods when working under these structural constrains and along with their parents they learn to navigate the multiple intersections of oppression on a daily basis.

Although based on a limited sample of non-working children of parents who are street vendors, the findings identify childhood characteristics previously missed in studying these children. While previous findings identified the status inconsistencies presented by English-speaking children assisting their non-English-speaking parents in business affairs, this study highlights the rich understanding that children gain about the sacrifices and risks street vending poses. As a consequence, children exposed first-hand to their parent’s work lives as street vendors and experience working the stands, results in the development of economic empathy. Unlike non-working children who demonstrate disinterest and sometimes embarrassment about their parents’ entrepreneur activity, working children acquire the knowledge for economic empathy. They come to recognize the structural constraints their parents’ citizenship status, class, language, and education position pose in financially caring for the family. A closer examination reveals that children who work long hours and in more precarious situations have the highest degree of economic empathy.

These findings demonstrate the ways that parents and children become closer (more equals) as they both engage in money-making activity for the benefit of the family and experience stigma and danger together. The work itself, precarious social locations, and dangerous/informal nature of the work helps shorten this distance between ‘adulthood’ and ‘childhood’. The downside of this decreased social distance could be the decreased authority of parents. However, economic empathy helps prevent an authority shift in favour of the children since children develop an economic stance towards their street vending parents rooted in a shared experience of struggle and resilience.

Notes

1. Similar strategies are developed in poor families in developing countries. For more on this, see Gonzalez de la Rocha (1994).
2. According to the 2010 Census, there are approximately 290,000 informal workers in Los Angeles County and 61 per cent of them are undocumented immigrants. Street vending is among these informal activities. According to the 2015 Economic Roundtable report, there are 50,000 microentrepreneurs (street vendors) operating every year.
3. See Los Angeles, Cal., Mun., Code § 42(b) (2004). Section 42(b) and Los Angeles, Cal., Mun. Code § 64.70.02.C.1(a)(2004).
4. Street vending is considered a misdemeanour (Kettles 2004). However, when the LAHD and the LAPD join forces and conduct sweeps together, the punishment is usually more serious: six months in jail, a $1000 fine, and confiscation of merchandise and wares such as their skillets, juice makers, and vending carts (Kettles 2004; Rosales 2013). In addition, citations are usually given to street vendors for other reasons not directly connected to the sales of food (e.g. blocking a sidewalk or a street).

5. La Cumbrita and El Callejon are pseudonyms given to the sites I studied in order to protect the anonymity of my respondents.

6. Around 2008, La Cumbrita gained public notoriety from LA foodie bloggers and newspapers, which attracted customers of heterogeneous class and ethnically diverse backgrounds in search of ‘authentic ethnic’ food. During my time in the field, I met many of these diverse clients such as a John, a white male accountant and marathon runner from New York. He was in town for the LA marathon and opted to have dinner at La Cumbrita after reading an article on street vending food in the newspaper.

7. Yesenia (age 23) and Victoria (age 21) had been out of school for a while. Victoria graduated from high school and was working at a non-profit organization. She planned to go back to school to study criminal justice. Yesenia was undocumented and dropped out of school after several failed attempts to pass the California High School Exit Examination. Patricia (age 18) had just graduated from high school when I interviewed her. She was not sure what she could do after high school since she was also undocumented (see note 7). Her plan was to continue selling tacos de barbacoa (goat meat) with her mother and work part-time at a fast food restaurant while she figured out how she could pay for college. Katia (age 21) was not in school when I met her, but she was interested in nursing. I went with her to the East Los Angeles Community College (ELAC) to get information about the nursing programme and I gave her tour of the campus. I gave a total of four college tours to University of Southern California and to ELAC. Eric (age 18) was also undocumented, but he did not plan to stay in the United States for a long time. His goal was to work for a couple of years selling raspados and return to Michoacan, México. He wanted to get married and work with his parents who owned an avocado farm.

8. For a gender analysis, please see Estrada and Hondagneu-Sotelo (2013).

Disclosure statement
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