The common image of children of immigrants engaged in pitched battles against tradition-bound parents from the old country is a partial, and often misleading, view. A more nuanced approach requires analyzing the sources of strife and strain, as well as cooperation, caring, and accommodation, and taking into account how intergenerational relations change over time.

Research documents many sources of intergenerational conflict. The typical strains between adolescents and parents in the United States are intensified in immigrant families owing to cultural differences between parents’ home-country values, norms and behavioral patterns and the mainstream American culture to which their U.S.-born and -raised children are expose and drawn (Foner & Kasinitz 2007, Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco 2001, Zhou 2001). This culture clash has been conceptualized as generational dissonance -- when children’s learning of American ways and simultaneous loss of the immigrant culture outstrips their parents’ (Portes & Rumbaut 2001). Immigrant parents may even hold up an idealized version of traditional values and customs as a model, even when these values and traditions have undergone considerable change since they left the home country (Foner 1997). Not surprisingly, intergenerational conflicts are likely to be particularly acute in groups in which cultural patterns and practices differ most sharply from those of mainstream American culture.

Issues of discipline and respect are one major flashpoint. Immigrant parents often expect a level of respect, deference, and obedience that their second-generation children view as authoritarian and domineering. The children have been raised in a U.S. cultural setting in which early independence is encouraged and childrearing norms are generally more permissive than in the parents’ home country (Foner & Kisinitz, 2007, Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco 2001, Zephir 2001, Zhou 2009, Zhou and Bankston 1998). In many countries of origin, corporal punishment was a common and acceptable aspect of childrearing; immigrant parents feel their authority is being undermined when they cannot discipline children the way they think best -- which, they believe, is essential to prevent behavioral problems and delinquency. They are outraged that they may even face charges of child abuse, including reports (or threats of reports) to state agencies by their own children (Kibria 1993, Pessar 2003, Stepick et al. 2001, Stepick & Stepick 2003, Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco 2001, Waters 1999, Waters & Sykes 2009, Zephir 2001).

While most of the research on intergenerational relations in immigrant families focuses on strains and conflicts, the literature indicates that there is another side to the story that demands equal attention. To say that families are battlefields between the generations (Lessinger 1995) is an oversimplification and an exaggeration. In many, probably most, cases, conflict is mixed with caring and cooperation, and rejection of some parental standards and practices is coupled with acceptance of others. In immigrant families, as in families in the wider U.S. population, familial norms of responsibility and feelings of closeness generally characterize intergenerational relations, which are a source of material, practical, and emotional support (Swartz 2009).
Families create strong emotional ties that bond members together, and even young people who resent parental constraints and obligations feel, at the same time, a complex combination of affection, loyalty, gratitude, responsibility, and a sense of duty to their immigrant parents (Suarez-Orozco et al. 2008). Most children in immigrant families appreciate their parents’ sacrifices on their behalf and recognize the importance of family and the need to provide financial and other kinds of instrumental assistance to family members (D’Alisera 2009, Espiritu 2009, Fuligni & Pedersen 2002, Rumbaut & Komaie 2010, Stepick et al. 2001).

For their part, immigrant parents also often work out compromises with their children as a way to get along. Far from being rigid traditionalists, many make accommodations and adjustments in response to their children’s demands and changes in the U.S. context, for example, giving their children more say in marriage arrangements, extending curfew hours, or modifying disciplinary practices (Lessinger 1995, Zephir 2001). Just as the second generation are agents of cultural innovation as they combine aspects of their parents’ and mainstream American culture, so too, new cultural patterns and social practices develop among immigrant parents in the context of new hierarchies, cultural conceptions, and social institutions in the United States (Foner 1997). A research challenge is to explore how, and under what conditions, immigrant parents begin to alter or modify their values, expectations, and childrearing practices as they learn new techniques and norms from their children, as well as from other sources, including coworkers, colleagues, and the media in the United States. Portes & Rumbaut (2001) suggest that when parents and children acculturate at the same time -- what they call consonant acculturation -- children are less likely to feel embarrassed by their parents and are more willing to accept parental guidance, thereby reducing the likelihood of intergenerational conflict.

Relations between the generations are not fixed or static and take new twists and turns over time as tensions rise and fall in response to changed circumstances and situations (see Gilbertson 2009). Of particular relevance are the shifts related to life-course change. Because most members of the second generation today are still young children, teenagers, and young adults, little has been written on relations with their immigrant parents as they move through the life course and set up families and households of their own or, in some cases, continue to live with their parents in extended family households (Kasinitz et al 2008). As the second generation (and their parents) grow older, new conflicts may emerge or old ones may become intensified, for example, when mothers criticize adult daughters’ childrearing techniques (Gilbertson 2009) or when aging and frail parents need support and care. Yet the literature suggests that reduction of conflict is more likely, at least while parents are still active and healthy, owing to the physical separation of the two generations when young people move out of the family home (Louie 2004, Park 2005) and because adult members of the second generation often reevaluate their earlier critical approaches as they assume parental roles (Waters & Sykes 2009) and daughters come to rely on mothers for advice, support, and sometimes, help with child care. In some immigrant groups, it is not uncommon for elderly immigrants to live for a significant period of time with their children and grandchildren in extended family households (Min 1998, Treas & Mazumdar 2004).

Frictions between immigrant parents and children over methods of parental discipline have a long history. So does the role of outside authorities in these conflicts. Research on societies for the prevention of the cruelty to children, which were founded and flourished in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, reveals cases of
children of immigrants reporting (or threatening to report) abusive parental behavior to
the authorities -- and immigrant parents then, much like today, complaining of not being
allowed to beat their children in America the way they did in the old country (Gordon

Yet if historical research brings out parallels with the past, the literature on
contemporary immigrants indicates that much is new about the dynamics of
intergenerational relations today owing to different social, economic, and political
conditions and arrangements. These include new norms in the United States about
women’s work and child abuse, changes in technology and communication,
transformations in the educational system, expanded opportunities for second-generation
daughters, and a new public discourse on ethnicity and ethnic diversity.

An additional modern development that has had positive implications for
intergenerational relations is the greater public tolerance of cultural diversity and
acceptance of cultural pluralism in the United States (Foner 2000). In the early twentieth
century, in the context of aggressive Americanization efforts and campaigns, many
children of European immigrants rejected and were ashamed of their parents’
embarrassing “foreign ways.” In contrast, the New York second-generation study
(Kasinitz et al. 2008) found that the young adult children of immigrants rarely felt
ashamed of their parents’ language and were proud of their bicultural abilities.

The social, economic, and political context of migration, settlement, and
incorporation provides the backdrop against which relationships unfold in the immigrant
family, as the comparisons across time and space show in an especially dramatic way. By
the same token, relations that develop between parents and children in immigrant families
have an impact well beyond the household and family. One of the many challenges for
the future is to further explore the repercussions of intergenerational relations within the
immigrant family for family members’ involvements in social, economic, political, and
cultural institutions outside it. There is also still much to learn about interpersonal
relations within immigrant families themselves, including how and why conflicts rise and
fall over time.

Foner, Nancy and Joanna Dreby. “Relations Between the Generations in Immigrant