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Challenges to the economic integration of Afghan refugees in the U.S.

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ABSTRACT

Informed by a modified segmented assimilation theory, we use 5% Census and American Community Survey data to examine the economic integration of Afghan refugees resettled in the U.S. First-wave Afghan refugees have made significant gains in income and employment, while their poverty rates and reliance on government assistance decreased dramatically. However, the most recent wave of Afghan refugees is not doing as well as the first at comparable points in time. Analysis of ACS data from 2006–2015 finds that, with controls, Afghan refugees' earned incomes are the lowest of seven refugee/immigrant comparison groups. Given the robust set of controls, we hypothesise that anti-Muslim discrimination is an important unmeasured explanatory factor and suggest where to focus future research on this topic. Afghans' lower incomes are substantially explained by lower employment levels, especially among less educated Afghan women and highly educated Afghan women and men. Evidence suggests that these patterns are influenced by distance between Afghan and U.S. gender orders, greater physical and mental disability from exposure to traumas, and the limited internal social capital of this small refugee group from a poor country.


KEYWORDS

Afghan; economic; employment; income; integration; language proficiency; refugee; welfare

Introduction

Much existing work on Afghans in the U.S., including our own, has been based on small community surveys or qualitative studies focused on the health and mental health effects of pre-migration war traumas and post-migration stressors (Alemi et al. 2014; Stempel et al. 2016). Although previous work has sensitised us to a variety of issues and challenges U.S. Afghans face that may affect their economic integration, we are aware of no prior research on Afghan American economic conditions or integration. With this foundation, we draw in this article on the 1990 5% Census and American Community Survey. We first present new empirical analysis mapping general economic patterns, comparing Afghans to other immigrant, refugee, and racial groups. This speaks directly to gaps in the extant

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literature, providing a basis for more detailed analysis that identifies key patterns and issues that future work will explore in greater depth.

Research on the economic integration of refugees in the U.S. often focuses on how quickly members of a refugee group are able to find employment and how much they rely on government services beyond initial settlement support (Kallick and Mathema 2016). We report information addressing these concerns, but focus more on obstacles and challenges Afghans face to achieving greater economic integration.¹ While U.S. refugees are encouraged to gain employment as soon as possible (U.S. Department of State 2017), many arrive unprepared for settlement in the U.S. and depend on government assistance during the first few years after resettlement. However, the gap in benefits usage between refugees and non-refugee migrants declines with length of residence (Capps and Newland 2015). FitzGerald and Arar (2017) suggest that, in the long run, the legal status of U.S. refugees is of greater benefit than the modest governmental support they receive when they first arrive, but we found no studies testing this.

Research on the U.S. has not found major differences in the economic integration of refugees compared to other immigrants. Using the U.S. *New Immigrant Survey*, Connor (2010) found no disparity in employment levels between refugees and non-refugee migrants, but refugees have lower hourly wages and occupational levels. These disparities are largely explained by lower levels of education and English proficiency. However, other factors including forms of family support and mental and physical health influence education and English ability. A more recent U.S. study using the American Community Survey found that refugee men are employed at a higher rate than their male counterparts, and refugee women are employed at the same rate as comparable women (Capps and Newland 2015). Luthra, Soehl, and Waldinger (2018a) found that with controls there is little difference in second generation educational outcomes between nationality groups with high rates of refugee admissions and other immigrants.

Theoretical framework

Our analytic strategy draws primarily from segmented assimilation theory and Wimmer's comparative theory of ethnic boundary making (Wimmer and Schiller 2002; Wimmer 2013). As discussed in the introductory essay (Gisselquist 2020), segmented assimilation theory (hereinafter SAT) diversifies the linear and unitary path of immigrant integration modelled by classical assimilation theory. While keeping a focus on individual and group factors central to assimilation and neo-assimilation models (e.g. education, language ability, length of time in host country, residential patterns, marriage patterns, gender orders), SAT highlights the influence and structural diversity of the contexts of reception, and thus the complex interactions between immigrant groups' economic, cultural, and social capital and the structure of regional labour markets, existing co-ethnic enclaves, and the field of race relations they are positioned in. This has fostered studies identifying three paths that assimilation may follow: into the 'mainstream', into ethnic enclaves and economies, or into stigmatised worlds of unskilled jobs, 'oppositional culture', and meagre educational resources. At the heart of SAT is understanding the modal strategies of adaptation that groups adopt in response to the structure of educational and labour markets they face, their groups' social capital, and how they are 'racialized' and how they react to that racialisation.

While SAT is helpful in conceptualising the structural contexts of settlement, we find it too confining and thus draw from ethnic boundary making theory (hereinafter EBMT) to illuminate and open up some of SAT's concepts and models. As Wimmer (2013, 19) notes, SAT maintains 'the basic scheme of "old" assimilation theory ... [and] ethnic groups move as Herderian wholes along the three possible paths of assimilation'. By focusing on boundary making, EBMT sensitises us to this essentialising tendency while providing tools for contributing to a genuinely comparative theory of immigrant settlement. In addition, we agree with Lamont's (2014) amendment to EBMT of adding a more robust focus on types of stigmatisation and responses to stigmatisation (Lamont et al. 2016). Thus, our longer range goal is a reworking of SAT via EBMT and Lamont's work on responses to stigmatisation. Alas, our theoretical ambitions outstrip existing research and available data, so this study must be seen as laying a foundation for us to contribute to this synthesis in future work. In conclusion, we return to these theories and suggest future research that may build towards our goals. For now, we mention a couple of ways we hope to expand SAT to fit the settlement of Afghans in the U.S.

Segmented assimilation research tends to take for granted that ethnic identities, boundaries, cultural norms and values, and networks of association all align, creating a unitary group (Wimmer's 'Herderian whole') and, initially, a bright social and cultural division between immigrant group and host society. In addition, SAT offers few tools for explaining the nature of nested or context dependent ethnic identities (e.g. Tajik, Afghan, Muslim, white, Asian, South Asian). Building on Barth's (1969) insight that socio-cultural boundaries may be sustained or changed through diacritics that have little to do with actual cultural differences, EBMT demonstrates that the 'Herderian whole' pattern is one possibility of many. It then develops a set of tools for understanding the strategies and figurations of moves aimed at shifting or modifying boundaries, and the power structure and institutional context that both shapes these moves and their effectiveness. We believe this 'boundary making' focus is vital to understanding the economic integration of Afghan refugees in the U.S.

Specifically, we find SAT's conception of 'reactive ethnicity' in response to discrimination useful, but it does not do justice to the diversity of Afghan Americans' strategies in response to the anti-immigrant climate and growing politicisation of Islam in U.S., and the changing Muslim identities. We also find SAT's conceptions of 'dissonant acculturation' helpful but too confining for thinking clearly about the complex patterns of identification and distinction among Afghan Americans. Stempel et al. (2016) have shown how consequential dissonant acculturation, especially around gender roles, is for the well-being of Afghan refugees in northern California. We expect that a robust understanding of Afghan boundary work and responses to stigmatisation will illuminate the identities and strategies influenced by patterns of dissonant and consonant acculturation.

The importance of studying the economic integration of U.S. Afghan refugees

The experiences of Afghan refugees in the U.S. may illuminate the economic integration of refugees and SAT in several valuable ways. First, Afghans are a small refugee group² from a very poor country that has experienced significant ongoing political violence for 40 years. Their small size and limited resources in the country of origin and transnational networks

limits Afghan refugees' abilities to develop and sustain 'Little Kabuls', support networks and occupational niches, or to develop pipelines to professions and re-credentialing opportunities (Zhou 2014; Waldinger 2015; Luthra, Waldinger, and Soehl 2018b). This may contribute to Afghans pursuing strategies that are less reliant on 'internal' social capital.

In addition, first wave Afghans arrived in the U.S. with high rates of 4-year college degrees and strong English skills (see below), yet a large portion of highly educated Afghan refugees have difficulty finding employment or training that fits or augments their credentials. Thus, Afghan refugees are a good case for understanding the troubles many immigrant groups face converting their cultural capital to economic capital, and the strategies adopted by 'declassed' refugees (Bratsberg and Ragan 2002; Friedberg 2000).

Third, many Afghan refugees have experienced significant life-threatening pre-migration and migration traumas and continue to struggle with depression and anxiety disorders, including high rates of PTSD, which may hamper or derail their economic success (Alemi et al. 2014; Stempel 2009; Stempel et al. 2016). High levels of distress and psychological disorders limit Afghan's employability and may impair their parenting, negatively influencing their children's psychological development and educational attainment (Stempel 2009).

Fourth, most Afghan refugees are Muslims from a country that is strongly associated in the U.S. media with fundamentalist Islam and Islamic terrorism, making them targets of significant discrimination (Pew Research Center 2017; Alemi and Stempel 2018). While a majority of Afghans identify as 'white' in the American Community Survey,³ many are viewed through racialised categories of Islam. Anti-Muslim hostility in the U.S. has also reportedly increased since the late 2000s (see Gisselquist 2020). Based on standard feeling thermometers, many more white Americans in 2016 felt 'colder' towards Muslims (32%), than towards Hispanics (11%), African Americans (11%), Asian Americans (7%) or Jewish Americans (5%) (ANES 2018). The gap between mean Muslim feeling thermometer scores among Democratic and Republican Party identifiers grew from seven points on a 100 point scale in 2004 to (57–50) to 19 points in 2016 (64–45), and support for Donald Trump's in the 2016 election was robustly influenced by negative attitudes towards Muslims (ANES 2018; Tesler and Sears 2010; Stempel 2018). If and how the greater hostility towards Muslims and politicisation of Islam influences economic outcomes of Muslim refugees is not well studied. Below we attribute a significant amount of the negative 'Afghan refugee effect' on income levels, net of robust controls, to discrimination.

Finally, Afghan migrants to the U.S. adjust to a society with a much different gender order than their society of origin (Omidian 1996; Stempel et al. 2016). This most visibly manifests itself in lower levels of employment for women (see below). However, we present findings that challenge a simplistic assimilationist model which assumes a process of Afghans gradually assimilating egalitarian gender beliefs and roles (Kibria 1993; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Stempel et al. 2016). Specifically, we highlight the low levels of employment among highly educated Afghan women and the lack of economic niches for less educated Afghan women. We also present evidence that a modified traditional gender division of labour, with less educated, recently arrived women being homemakers may be an effective strategy for increasing household income among Afghans in New Jersey suburbs of New York City. There are complex and important stories to tell

about first and second generation Afghans grappling with the U.S. gender order, no doubt drawing on gender struggles in Afghanistan and the larger Afghan Diaspora, and how this shapes economic strategies and outcomes.

In addition, we include a focus on geographic patterns of Afghan American resettlement, highlighting similarities and differences between Afghans in the New York City, Washington, D.C., and San Francisco Bay Area. We then suggest how geographic differences may reflect divergent strategies and pathways for economic integration.

As the first study of this kind and because of data limitations, we focus our analysis on the first generation, pointing to important challenges they face and directions for future work.

Data and methods

Data

We used the 2006–2015 American Community Survey (ACS) and the 1990 5% Census for our analysis (Ruggles et al. 2017). The 2006–2015 ACS provided a weighted sample of 5613 Afghan refugees and 4614 Afghan refugee adults of working ages (18–64). The 1990 5% Census provided a weighted sample of 1148 Afghan refugees who arrived between 1980 and 1990, of which 770 were ages 18–64. In addition to education, English speaking ability, linguistic isolation (no one in the household speaks English well), ACS has a variety of measures of income and economic well-being. We selected employment status, individual earned income, family income, and poverty status as our primary measures of economic well-being. Other variables we utilise are citizenship status among non-native born, years in the U.S., gender, age, marital status, number of family members in the household, race, Hispanic background, and physical and mental disability. Finally, we constructed several variables: age of arrival in the U.S., number of family members of working age in the household, median home value in Public Use Microdata Area (PUMA), median family income in PUMA, and percentage of foreign born in PUMA.

The ACS does not clearly identify refugees or asylees or refugee-like immigrants. Thus, we used questions on country of birth, first and second ancestry, year of arrival to the U.S., and if they reported ‘born outside country of American parents’ on the citizenship question to construct a category of ‘Afghan refugee’. Details of our operationalisation and a comparison of ACS to *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics* numbers of Afghan refugees are in Appendix A. Based on this analysis, we concluded that throughout most of the post-1979 migrations, majorities to very strong majorities of Afghan immigrants came under refugee or SIV status. Strong majorities of the remainder came as immediate family members under family reunification. Over time, other family preferences have grown modestly, but *most* Afghans in the U.S., whether refugees/asylees or not, have been directly influenced by the experiences and special treatment of refugees.

Descriptive results

Social and economic geography of Afghan refugees in the U.S.

Table 1 shows that in 1990, California had by far the largest share of Afghan refugees in the U.S. (44%), followed by Virginia (18%) and New York (14%). Afghans were most

Table 1. States with largest populations of Afghan refugees, 1990 and 2006–2015.

1990*		2006–2015**	
California	44.3%	California	44.3%
Virginia	18.2%	Virginia	14.1%
New York	13.8%	New York	9.2%
Texas	4.4%	Texas	3.8%
Illinois	2.3%	New Jersey	3.1%
New Jersey	2.3%	Georgia	2.7%
Nebraska	1.7%	Maryland	1.9%
Georgia	1.6%	Washington	1.9%
Washington	1.5%	Florida	1.7%
Colorado	1.2%	Connecticut	1.5%
<i>N</i>	1149	<i>N</i>	3412

Source: Authors' illustration based on 1990 Census* and ACS 2006–15** (Ruggles et al. 2017).

concentrated in the cities of Hayward and Fremont between Oakland and San Jose, California; Alexandria, Falls Church, and Fairfax, Virginia, all of which are suburbs of Washington, D.C.; and the Borough of Queens in New York City. Appendix B contains details of the racial/ethnic makeup, and education and income levels of the cities and PUMAs with the greatest concentration of Afghan refugees, and the incomes of Afghans living in those cities and PUMAs. To summarise, the cities Afghans settled in had significantly higher median family incomes than the national median and they contained substantially more foreign-born residents than the national rate. Racially, Afghans lived in cities or neighbourhoods with many more Asian Americans and fewer African Americans than the national rate. Afghan refugees were very small minorities in all of the cities they lived in, and their family incomes were significantly lower than the local medians. Importantly, there were substantial geographic differences in Afghan family incomes. The Hayward-Fremont, California Afghans had the lowest incomes and the Afghans in the Virginia suburbs of Washington, D.C. had the highest, with the Queens, New York Afghans in-between.

We then compared the changes and continuities in the geographic location of Afghans between 1990 and 2011–2015 (see Appendix B for details). In 2011–2015, California continued to have by far the largest Afghan refugee population (44%), while percentages of the Afghan population in Virginia and New York declined significantly.

Table 2 compares Afghans in 2006–2015 across states by income, employment, poverty, education, and food stamp reliance. Economically, we found that Virginia Afghans' have persistently enjoyed greater economic success, while over time California Afghans have passed the New York Afghans in both family and earned income. New Jersey and Maryland Afghans are doing the best economically, perhaps because many are high-income migrants from New York and Virginia respectively. Maryland Afghans' high rate of holding 4-year college degrees (59%) is likely an important source of their high incomes, while the New Jersey Afghans have among the highest family incomes (but not earned incomes) by having the most working age family members in the household.

Table 3 shows that in 1990 Afghan refugees were educationally bifurcated, with higher rates possessing a college degree, and higher rates having less than a high school degree than their U.S. counterparts. Afghan refugees were much more likely to live at or below the poverty level and they lived in larger families, including having more family

Table 2. Afghan refugees, selected economic, social and educational characteristics by state, 2006–2015.

State	Total family income*		\bar{x} Age 18–64 in family	Food stamps	At/below poverty	% of total	College degree plus**	Employed**	Personal earned income*		
	Median	Mean							Median**	Mean**	% of total**
California	\$50,304	\$73,046	2.2	20.6%	26.8%	44.8%	33.5%	57.9%	\$13,391	\$32,346	45.1%
Virginia	\$70,197	\$93,393	2.3	19.8%	17.1%	15.2%	36.8%	73.4%	\$25,467	\$40,011	15.0%
New York	\$35,548	\$62,682	2.6	28.9%	33.2%	10.7%	24.2%	57.8%	\$12,210	\$21,553	11.3%
Texas	\$29,027	\$60,950	2.1	24.3%	34.9%	3.2%	26.1%	63.6%	\$19,200	\$28,692	3.3%
New Jersey	\$87,406	\$97,554	3.2	15.4%	16.4%	2.8%	27.9%	68.7%	\$18,344	\$31,333	3.2%
Georgia	\$28,035	\$51,906	2.4	47.2%	54.5%	2.7%	31.8%	52.4%	\$8,020	\$38,146	2.3%
Maryland	\$80,000	\$98,019	2.1	10.9%	5.5%	1.8%	59.2%	71.4%	\$50,177	\$48,944	1.7%
Arizona	\$42,075	\$59,285	2.9	45.9%	31.0%	1.7%	27.8%	56.2%	\$12,126	\$24,466	1.7%
Missouri	\$36,750	\$42,331	2.0	67.1%	33.1%	1.6%	26.8%	53.9%	\$16,807	\$24,783	1.2%
Florida	\$29,101	\$55,549	2.5	37.9%	52.7%	1.5%	33.4%	64.7%	\$15,587	\$21,787	1.3%
Other states	\$45,052	\$65,111	2.0	28.9%	32.5%	14.1%	29.8%	57.7%	\$15,501	\$31,009	13.8%
U.S. Afghans	\$50,000	\$73,110	2.3	25.0%	27.2%	100.0%	32.2%	60.8%	\$16,281	\$31,990	100.0%
U.S., All	\$59,621	\$81,046	1.9	14.1%	14.6%	–	30.5%	72.6%	\$27,732	\$40,052	–
N	5552	5552	5613	5552	5558	5552	4051	4051	4051	4051	4051

Notes: * 2015 U.S. Dollars; **Ages 25–65.

Source: Authors' illustration based on ACS 2006–15 (Ruggles et al. 2017).

Table 3. Afghan cultural and economic capital by wave of migration, compared to non-Afghans, 1990 to 2006–2015.

	Afghan, arrived 1980–1990, 1990 5% census	Afghans, arrived 1980–1990, 2006– 2015 ACS	Afghans, arrived 0– 10 years ago, 2006– 2015 ACS	U.S. non- Afghan, 1990	U.S. non- Afghan, 2006–2015
% Speaks English, very well/only	43.9% (1123)	57.3% (2274)	40.8% (1882)	93.9%	91.4%
% College degree or higher **	27.1% (654)	35.6% (2181)	25.8% (1100)	20.3%	28.8%
% <High School Degree**	27.7% (653)	19.8% (2181)	23.5% (1100)	20.1%	12.8%
% Employed*	54.7% (767)	65.7 (1985)	48.7% (1375)	72.6%	70.2%
% Poverty or less	32.2% (1132)	17.7 (2264)	40.7% (1847)	13.2%	15.0%
% Receive food stamps	Not available	14.1% (2274)	40.6% (1881)	Not available	14.1%
Median family income	\$42,885 (1133)	\$67,189 (2260)	\$34,847 (1847)	\$62,326	\$59,621
Median family income ÷ Adult family members in household	16,568 (1118)	33,328 (2263)	\$14,000 (1810)	\$32,402	\$31,536
Median earned income*	\$4765 (770)	\$22,145 (1985)	\$4900 (1375)	\$24,530	\$22,428
Mean earned income*	\$17,673 (770)	\$39,030 (1985)	\$16,653 (1375)	\$34,233	\$35,655
Mean family members in household	4.6 (1148)	4.0 (2274)	4.7 (1881)	3.3	3.2
Mean adult family members in household	2.6 (1148)	2.0 (2274)	2.5 (1881)	1.9	1.9

Notes: *Ages 18–64; **Ages 25 and over; All income in 2015 dollars.

members of working age (18–64). Afghan refugees had much lower average family and personal earned incomes as measured in several ways.

By 2006–2015, first wave Afghan refugees' economic and educational capital had improved by all measures. While still educationally bifurcated (relative to U.S. rates), their rate of holding 4-year college degrees increased by eight percentage points, and the percentage of first wave Afghan refugees with less than a high school degree dropped 8%. Their employment rate increased, as did their family and personal earned incomes. In constant dollars, their median earned income nearly quadrupled, their mean earned income more than doubled, and their median family income per adult family member doubled. This is considerable economic progress. By 2006–2015, first-wave Afghans had median family incomes that were significantly higher than the U.S. median, although this difference largely disappears when controlling for the number of working age adults in the family. Median personal earned incomes of first wave Afghans were nearly identical to the U.S. median. Finally, levels of poverty among first wave Afghans declined by 45% and by 2006–2015 their rate of reliance on food stamps was identical to their non-Afghan U.S. counterparts.

Overall, the picture of first wave Afghan refugees is one of significant economic progress between 1990 and 2006–2015. Yet there is also evidence that many first wave Afghan refugees are not doing well economically. First wave Afghans' rate of employment is nearly five percentage points lower than the employment rate for non-Afghans. First wave Afghans have higher rates of poverty than U.S. rates and their earned incomes are lower than U.S. averages when accounting for local costs of living, and poverty rates are higher. For instance, first wave Afghans refugees' (ages 18–64) ratio of earned incomes

to their PUMA medians is 0.86, compared to 1.00 for the U.S. as a whole. For family incomes, the ratio for Afghans is 0.91 compared to 1.00 for the U.S., not adjusting for Afghan refugees having more adult earners in their families. The relative incomes for first wavers are even lower when we look at the high earning ages 40–59, which make up 55% of this aging cohort. The median ratio of earned income to median earned income in PUMA of first wavers age 40–49 is 0.95, compared to 1.49 for U.S. adults age 40–49, and the median ratio for first wavers age 50–59 is 0.72, compared to 1.34 for U.S. adults age 50–59. These are significant gaps.

Turning to recent arrivals, column three shows figures for Afghan refugees who in 2006–2015 had arrived in the last 10 years. Recent arrivals have slightly lower rates of English competence and 4-year college degrees than their 1990 counterparts did. However, because of demographic changes in the U.S., the current waves' rate of college degrees is now lower than the U.S. rate and their rates of possessing less than a high school degree are much higher relative to the U.S. population (24% to 13%). Thirty-two per cent of recently arrived Afghan women have less than a high school degree. Further, their employment rate is 6% points lower and their poverty rates are 9% points higher (41%–32%) than the first wave in 1990. Forty-one per cent of the current wave of Afghan refugees receive food stamps compared to 14% for the whole U.S. In constant dollars, median family incomes for the current wave of Afghan refugees are about \$8000 lower than first wavers' family incomes in 1990 and the current waves earned incomes are roughly comparable to first wavers in 1990.

In summary, the first wave of Afghan refugees have made significant gains in their economic and cultural capital since 1990, but live disproportionately in high cost of living areas. Controlling for cost of living, the first wave Afghan refugees are significantly behind other individuals and families in their communities in terms of income and poverty status, particularly among the 40–59 age group. Lastly, current wave Afghan refugees are not doing as well economically as first wavers were at a comparable stage of settlement in the U.S.

Comparing Afghan refugees to selected U.S. refugee, immigrant, and racial groups, 2006–2015

To better understand the economic integration of Afghan refugees we turned to comparing Afghan refugees on a variety of measures of economic and cultural capital to selected 'comparison groups:' refugee groups (Cuban, Vietnamese, Hmong), immigrant groups (Mexican, Asian Indian, Filipino), U.S. racial groups (white, black), and U.S. totals. Details of this analysis can be found in Appendix E. Here are some key findings:

- (1) Among adults ages 18–64, Afghans have the lowest rate of employment (59%) among the comparison groups. This is due primarily to the very low rate of employment of Afghan women (46%). The latter is low regardless of how long they have been in the U.S., but it is particularly low among recent arrivals (23% among those in the U.S. for 0–5 years) and those with the lowest and highest levels of education. Further, when controlling for education, Afghan men with a college degree or higher have the lowest levels of employment.

- (2) Afghan men and Afghan women have higher rates of English competence and possessing a 4-year college degree than Cuban, Vietnamese, and Hmong refugees, and Mexican immigrants, but lower than Filipino and Asian Indian immigrants.
- (3) Controlling for cost of living, Afghan refugees' median family income is near the bottom of the comparison groups. Comparing the median ratio of the respondents' family incomes to the median family income of the PUMA they reside in, Afghans' ratio of 0.68 is close to the lowest (0.64) shared by Mexican immigrants and U.S. born African Americans.

Converting cultural capital to economic capital

Afghans have high levels of cultural capital, yet on various economic measures, they are similar to Hmong refugees and Mexican immigrants who have much lower levels of cultural capital. One problem with ACS data is that it does not distinguish between schooling completed in Afghanistan and schooling in the U.S., or some other place. To address this, we used age at arrival in the U.S. among those with college degrees or higher as a proxy, assuming that people who arrive in the U.S. at age 21 or younger that have a college degree earned it in the U.S. and most of those who arrive at age 30 or older earned their college degrees in Afghanistan or outside the U.S. Of course, younger arrivals generally do better economically for reasons other than where they earned their college degree. Nevertheless, our findings suggest that there is a strong independent negative effect for college and advanced degrees earned outside the U.S.

Table 4 shows that among those who have less than a college degree the ones who arrived at age 30+ have a median income of about \$11,000 less than those who arrived by age 21. However, among those with a college degree or higher this same gap is about \$32,000 for both men and women. The larger income gap by age of arrival among the college educated is because they had trouble converting or augmenting their foreign education into well-paying jobs in the U.S. Once again gendering the analysis is essential. Table 5 shows that Afghan men arriving after age 30 with a college degree have only moderately lower employment rates (7%) than their counterparts who arrived by age 21, while the gap for non-college educated Afghan men is greater (13%). The pattern is reversed and more dramatic for Afghan women, with those arriving with a college degree after age 30 having an employment rate fully 30 percentage points lower than their counterparts who arrive by age 21. The age of arrival gap for non-college educated Afghan women is substantially less at 19%. Thus, the employment and income patterns for Afghan women in Tables 4 and 5 fit and refine our earlier interpretation that college educated Afghan women face the greatest obstacles converting their higher educational credentials to economic capital. The patterns for Afghan males suggests

Table 4. Median income of employed Afghan refugees, by gender, education, and age of arrival; ages 25–64, 2015 dollars.

Age of arrival	Female				Male			
	< College	<i>n</i>	College +	<i>n</i>	< College	<i>n</i>	College +	<i>n</i>
0–21	\$26,913	287	\$57,954	209	\$37,939	448	\$77,424	224
30+	\$15,501	99	\$25,892	60	\$26,000	174	\$45,578	197
Difference	\$11,412		\$32,062		\$11,939		\$31,846	

Table 5. Employment rate of Afghan refugees, by gender, education, and age of arrival; ages 25–64.

Age of arrival	Female				Male			
	< College	<i>n</i>	College +	<i>n</i>	< College	<i>n</i>	College +	<i>n</i>
0–21	45%	632	72%	290	76%	418	85%	263
30+	26%	376	42%	143	63%	278	78%	253
Difference	19%		30%		13%		7%	

that for them arriving with a college degree, rather than earning one in the U.S., does not affect their employment rates, but does lower their ability to secure employment that pays commensurate to their education. Highly educated Afghan women who arrive after turning 30 have much lower employment rates and much lower incomes than Afghan women who arrive by age 21.

Economic niches

Our preliminary analyses found that despite Afghan’s higher levels of cultural capital, Vietnamese refugees, and to a lesser extent Cuban refugees, performed better on several measures of economic integration. Because less educated, recently arrived female Afghans have particularly low employment and income levels we wondered if differences in co-ethnic economic niches might partially explain these differences. Larger immigrant groups may have more resources to create occupational niches and replicate them in new locations.

To explore occupational niches we compared Afghan to Vietnamese refugees. The latter is about 20 times the size of Afghans in the U.S. We expected to find that Afghans have not developed occupational niches to the same extent that Vietnamese refugees have (Eckstein and Nguyen 2011). Our findings detailed in Appendix G strongly support this expectation. Vietnamese refugees’ large niche in nail salons and hairdressers-cosmetologists employed 29% of recently arrived Vietnamese women with less than a college degree (0–10 years, *n* = 10,737). Among all working age, Vietnamese refugee women, 25% without a college degree work in these occupations. The strongest economic niche among Afghans is 13% of working age Afghan males in Virginia (4% in New York, 5% in California) were employed as taxi-drivers/chauffeurs. Thus, it appears that Afghans in the U.S. have not developed significant occupational niches which support women’s employment and their only substantial economic niche for men exists only in Virginia.

Multivariate analysis

We conducted a set of eight Ordinary Least Squares regressions explaining logged personal earned income (2015 dollars) for U.S. adults, ages 18–64. Table 6 includes models 1–4 that provide the main effects of demographic controls, immigration variables, cultural capital, and cost of living. Based on our descriptive analyses, we expected that in Model 4 Afghan refugees would be most negatively associated with earned income among the comparison of immigrant and refugee groups. Table 7 reports models 5–8 which add interaction terms and additional factors that we expected to explain (and thus reduce) the Afghan refugee effect in Model 4. Thus, our analytic strategy was to use these different

Table 6. OLS regression explaining log of earned income in 2015 dollars, for U.S. adults, ages 18–64.

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>
(Constant)	10.30	9736.24	10.32	9625.18	9.69	3675.35	9.45	3312.33
Gender (Female) ¹	-0.32	-624.15	-0.32	-628.73	-0.35	-749.78	-0.35	-750.28
Age	0.00	100.45	0.00	75.98	0.00	88.04	0.00	81.90
Black ²	-0.16	-208.98	-0.17	-212.72	-0.09	-117.35	-0.08	-113.90
Native American	-0.24	-87.37	-0.25	-88.78	-0.14	-52.91	-0.12	-48.07
Asian, Pacific Islander	0.02	18.29	-0.03	-17.54	-0.08	-55.11	-0.11	-76.53
Other/mixed race	-0.06	-57.33	-0.06	-54.76	-0.02	-24.49	-0.03	-28.80
Hispanic ³	-0.15	-195.63	-0.11	-117.66	0.03	36.90	0.02	22.18
Family size	-0.03	-190.14	-0.03	-189.46	-0.01	-61.96	-0.01	-73.02
Married, spouse present ⁴	0.46	658.50	0.46	660.23	0.35	534.40	0.36	540.97
Married, spouse absent	0.12	68.53	0.14	78.92	0.13	83.97	0.14	86.63
Separated	0.15	87.28	0.15	89.02	0.19	121.68	0.19	125.33
Divorced	0.25	264.17	0.25	263.81	0.25	280.87	0.25	287.62
Widowed	0.00	0.90	0.01	3.35	0.06	32.29	0.07	35.90
0–5 years in U.S. ⁵			-0.22	-81.88	-0.27	-108.94	-0.27	-108.15
6–10 years in U.S.			-0.04	-17.23	-0.07	-27.26	-0.07	-27.61
11–15 years in U.S.			0.00	-0.45	-0.02	-8.22	-0.02	-9.22
16–20 years in U.S.			0.02	6.73	0.01	2.51	0.00	1.42
21+ years in U.S.			0.04	19.83	0.03	18.06	0.03	15.56
Naturalised citizen ⁶			0.12	51.79	0.10	50.32	0.09	41.13
Not naturalised citizen			-0.04	-18.33	0.05	24.33	0.04	17.95
Afghan refugee ⁷			-0.26	-16.63	-0.16	-11.39	-0.19	-13.75
Cuban refugee			-0.10	-22.31	-0.08	-20.07	-0.09	-22.39
Vietnamese refugee			-0.13	-32.51	0.09	26.10	0.10	28.63
Hmong refugee			-0.27	-21.45	-0.03	-2.21	0.03	2.64
Filipino immigrant			0.08	25.07	0.09	28.44	0.10	32.34
Mexican immigrant			-0.14	-90.45	0.04	23.64	0.05	35.18
Asian Indian immigrant			0.22	74.67	0.04	16.00	0.05	19.48
Grade 7–9 ⁸					-0.06	-32.07	-0.06	-31.13
Grade 10–12					-0.07	-39.62	-0.07	-41.52
HS degree, GED					0.19	120.23	0.18	116.49
<1 year college					0.25	143.03	0.24	137.60
1+ years college					0.30	184.06	0.29	176.96
Associates degree					0.48	279.07	0.47	272.32
4-Year degree					0.74	453.67	0.71	438.59
Masters degree					0.94	532.27	0.92	516.48
Professional degree					1.29	544.88	1.26	532.34
Ph.D.					1.20	435.15	1.17	427.23
English speaking					0.05	102.85	0.06	106.96
Linguistic isolation ⁹					0.05	36.29	0.06	38.63
Median family income, PUMA							0.00	150.71
Median home value, PUMA							0.00	14.29
% Foreign born in PUMA							0.20	84.88
<i>R</i> ² /change <i>R</i> ²	12.4/12.4		13.0/0.6		25.9/12.9		26.3/0.4	

Notes: References are 1, Male; 2, White; 3, not Hispanic; 4, never married; 5, born in U.S.; 6, citizen by birth; 7, not in 7 immigrant groups; 8, grade school or less; 9, not linguistically isolated or in group quarters; All changes in *R*² are significant at $p < .001$.

models as steps in teasing out effects of factors influencing earned income levels raised by previous literature and our descriptive analyses. One important factor we do not have any measure for is exposure to discrimination, which we address in the conclusion.

Note that, because of the large sample size, virtually all of the relationships are significant at $p < .001$ until we get to the detailed interaction effects. Thus, it is important to look at the relative strength of effects. Because income is logged, we can interpret *b* (unstandardised beta) as close to the proportion of change in predicted earned income for a one-unit increase in the independent variable. Thus, for example, net of other effects, Model 1 in

Table 7. OLS regression explaining log of earned income in 2015 dollars, for U.S. adults, ages 18–64.

	Model 5		Model 6		Model 7		Model 8	
	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>
Asian, Pacific Islander	-0.11	-76.36	-0.10	-74.89	-0.10	-75.44	-0.03	-26.80
Other/mixed race	-0.03	-28.67	-0.03	-29.63	-0.02	-20.72	-0.02	-24.09
Hispanic ³	0.02	22.95	0.02	23.45	0.02	18.44	-0.01	-8.30
Afghan refugee ⁷	-0.11	-4.11	-0.12	-4.37	-0.10	-3.91	-0.02	-0.93
Cuban refugee	-0.09	-12.29	-0.12	-16.23	-0.10	-14.42	-0.08	-15.56
Vietnamese refugee	0.03	4.29	0.01	1.44	0.01	2.10	-0.05	-9.22
Hmong refugee	-0.06	-3.00	-0.07	-3.57	-0.05	-2.31	-0.06	-3.65
Afghan × female	-0.09	-2.98	-0.12	-3.73	-0.11	-3.45	0.02	0.88
Afghan × <high school	0.21	3.63	0.20	3.45	0.15	2.70	-0.09	-2.23
Afghan × college degree	-0.25	-4.96	-0.04	-0.64	-0.02	-0.42	-0.02	-0.56
Afghan × advanced degree	-0.12	-3.11	0.01	0.32	0.03	0.66	0.04	1.44
Afghan × 0–10 years U.S.	0.00	0.03	0.01	0.16	0.00	0.13	0.00	-0.03
Cuban × female	0.03	3.41	0.03	3.41	0.03	3.82	0.07	10.57
Cuban × <high school	0.05	3.36	0.05	3.64	0.03	2.54	-0.01	-1.16
Cuban × college degree	-0.21	-18.47	-0.04	-3.14	-0.03	-2.46	0.00	-0.33
Cuban × advanced degree	-0.25	-15.47	-0.10	-6.02	-0.10	-5.87	-0.05	-4.19
Cuban × 0–10 years U.S.	0.07	8.14	0.09	10.72	0.08	9.48	-0.01	-1.94
Vietnamese × female	0.08	10.01	0.08	10.00	0.07	9.58	0.04	7.68
Vietnamese × <high school	0.15	12.18	0.15	12.52	0.11	9.77	-0.02	-2.38
Vietnamese × college degree	0.01	0.85	0.04	4.48	0.06	6.78	0.11	15.47
Vietnamese × advanced degree	0.02	1.77	0.06	4.24	0.09	6.33	0.12	11.57
Vietnamese × 0–10 years U.S.	-0.05	-5.53	-0.04	-5.42	-0.04	-5.33	-0.03	-5.21
Hmong × female	0.25	8.91	0.25	8.95	0.25	9.02	0.18	8.58
Hmong × <high school	-0.02	-0.45	-0.01	-0.33	0.00	-0.02	0.01	0.39
Hmong × college degree	-0.06	-1.49	-0.07	-1.82	-0.05	-1.36	-0.06	-2.32
Hmong × advanced degree	0.03	0.54	0.01	0.15	0.03	0.44	-0.06	-1.25
Hmong × 0–10 years U.S.	-0.03	-0.89	-0.05	-1.42	-0.07	-1.93	0.04	1.44
Afghan × female × <high sch.	-0.24	-3.22	-0.22	-2.91	-0.19	-2.59	0.15	2.84
Cuban × female × <high sch.	-0.01	-0.66	-0.02	-0.80	-0.01	-0.39	0.08	5.17
Vietnamese × female × <high sch.	0.02	1.00	0.01	0.89	0.00	0.19	0.05	4.35
Hmong × female × <high sch.	-0.10	-1.95	-0.10	-1.96	-0.09	-1.90	-0.01	-0.39
Arrive U.S. age 30+ × college+			-0.22	-99.56	-0.20	-94.65	-0.14	-84.57
Afghan × arrive U.S. age 30+ × college+			-0.32	-5.50	-0.33	-5.73	-0.31	-7.20
Cuban × arrive U.S. age 30+ × college+			-0.19	-10.78	-0.19	-11.26	-0.20	-15.58
Vietnamese × arrive U.S. age 30+ × coll+			-0.11	-5.22	-0.13	-6.45	-0.14	-9.44
Hmong × arrive U.S. age 30+ × college+			0.54	2.79	0.54	2.89	0.33	2.37
Physical & mental disability					-0.48	-725.63	-0.13	-248.07
Employment							1.10	2776.49
R ² /change R ²	26.3/0.0		26.4/0.1		30.2/3.8		60.9/30.8	

Notes: References are, 3, not Hispanic; 7, not in 7 immigrant groups.

Table 6 predicts those who are married, with spouse present, will earn .46 (46%) more income than those who have never been married. Likewise, women would earn 32% less than men, and African Americans 16% less than whites. Model 1 shows that there are substantial gender, race, and marital status effects on personal income. Combined, the background variables explain 12% of the variation in personal earned income.

Model 2 adds migration and migrant factors: years in the U.S., naturalised citizenship, and dummy variables for each of the seven comparison immigrant and refugee groups. Net of controls, Afghans and Hmong refugees have the strongest negative effects on income (-26% and - 27% respectively). However, Mexican immigrants' incomes (-14%) are close behind when we include the -11% effect for also being Hispanic, and Hmong refugees have an additional -3% effect of being Asian or Pacific Islander. Recall that about one-third of Afghans identify as more than one race, a category which has a -6% effect in this model.

Model 3 adds cultural capital measures: education, English speaking ability, and linguistic isolation. The Afghan refugee effect in Model 3 stands out as negative and stronger than the other immigrant group effects, with a predicted income of 16% lower than U.S. adults who are not members of one of our seven refugee/immigrant groups. Next, closest are Cuban refugees at -8% and Hmong refugees at -3% . Adding in their respective race effects those figures change to -5% and -11% respectively.

Model 4 adds geographic controls for the median family income in respondent's PUMA, median home value in PUMA, and percentage of foreign-born residents in PUMA. The first two variables control for cost of living and the percentage of foreign born may positively influence the economic opportunities for refugees. Because Afghans live in higher income and higher housing cost areas, controlling for these variables increases the negative Afghan effect to a predicted income of -19% less than the reference. Cuban refugees are next closest at -7% . Adding the racial effects to immigrant group effects, the next closest to Afghans in terms of lower predicted income are Hmong refugees at -8% . Afghan refugees having the strongest negative effect in Model 4 is consistent with earlier findings on their lower employment rates, conversion troubles, and low incomes when controlling for cost of living.

Models 5–8 are presented in Table 7. To limit clutter, it reports only the coefficients of the immigrant variables, the newly added variables, and three relevant racial variables. The coefficients for the unreported variables change little except in Model 8 when we add employment. Model 5 adds two-way interaction terms for each refugee group by gender, recent arrival in the U.S. (0–10 years), and three education levels (less than high school, college degree, advanced degree), and a three-way interaction for each refugee group with gender and education.

Results for Model 5 show that the Afghan refugee effect remains the largest negative effect of the refugee groups at -11% , although Hmong refugees have 17% less earned income when you include their -11% Asian and Pacific Islander effect. As expected, given earlier findings, the Afghan female effect is negative (-9%). The other three refugee groups show a positive effects for women. However, these are on top of a -35% overall female effect.

To address the strong gender divide among Afghans without a high school degree we included interaction terms for Afghans and Afghan women with less than high school education. The strong gender divide is apparent in the coefficients for these two terms in Model 5. Afghans with less than a high school degree earn 21% more than others without a high school degree (not including the other three refugee groups), but Afghan women without a high school degree earn 24% less than Afghan men or slightly less than other working age adults with less than a high school degree. No other refugee group has such a strong gender difference among those with less than a high school degree.

It is interesting to compare female Afghans to female Vietnamese refugees with less than high school degrees. In Model 5, Vietnamese women earn 8% more than other females (keep in mind the 35% female effect), Vietnamese without a high school degree earn 15% more than others without high school, and the 'Vietnamese women with less than high school' term is non-significant. Combined these illustrate how much better Vietnamese women without a high school degree are doing than their Afghan counterparts.

Also as expected, Model 5 shows that Afghans have negative college degree and advanced degree effects, -25% and -12% respectively. Cubans also show strong negative

college degree and advanced degree effects of -21% and -25% . Hmong and Vietnamese refugees have non-significant college and advanced degree effects. Finally, contrary to our expectations, recently arrived Afghans do not have statistically significant lower incomes than other recently arrived immigrants.

Model 6 adds a proxy variable for having college and advanced degrees earned outside the U.S. – arriving to the U.S. at age 30 plus and currently possessing a college degree or higher. We also added an interaction term for each refugee group with this proxy variable. Results strongly support our expectation that the strength of the negative ‘Afghan \times college degree’ and ‘Afghan \times advanced degree’ coefficients would be reduced when entering these controls. In Model 5 they were -25% and -12% respectively, but with the new controls, they are reduced to -4% and $+1\%$, with neither significant at $p < .05$. Thus, accounting for our proxy for college and advanced degrees earned outside the U.S., other Afghans with college and advanced degrees earn at average U.S. levels. It is important to note that in addition to the -22% general effect of arriving in the U.S. after turning age 30 and having a college degree, the Afghan three-way interaction of this term has the strongest negative effect (-32%) on earned income among the refugee groups. Thus, Afghans are particularly harmed by this pattern. Cubans’ strong negative college and advanced degree effects in Model 5 were substantially reduced (but not erased, as with Afghans) through controls in Model 6.

Model 7 adds a small index of mental and physical disability created by summing two binary items asking if the person had difficulty walking or climbing stairs, or difficulty remembering, concentrating, or making decisions. We used these items as weak measures of the psychological distress and health problems many refugees experience because of traumas experienced in their country of origin, while fleeing, or during displacement. Despite the weakness of this measure, the main Afghan refugee coefficient went from -12% to -10% in the expected direction. In a separate test, we added the mental/physical disability variable to Model 2 and compared the regression coefficients for Model 2 and Model 2 plus physical/mental disability. Afghan’s regression coefficient did decrease modestly in the expected direction from $-.256$ to $-.232$ (9.5%). Although this is relatively weak mediation (Afghan refugee status is positively related to memory and physical difficulties, and these difficulties are negatively associated with earned income), it is a stronger mediation than for any of the other groups except Hmong refugees, whose coefficient improved from $-.279$ to $-.212$ or 24.2% .

Model 7 is a full model before partialing out the effects of underemployment. We see that Afghans have the largest main effect of the refugees at -10% , followed by Hmong at -5% , although Vietnamese and Hmong have a -10% Asian and Pacific Islander effect. Because the Asian and Pacific Islander and Hispanic racial/ethnic groups are broad umbrellas, we reran Model 7 without race and ethnic dummy variables. Hmong refugees had the highest refugee group main effect at -11% , followed by Afghans at -8% , Cubans at -6% , and Vietnamese at -5% . The effects of the Afghan refugee interactions remained the same.

In Model 7, Afghan females have a -11% effect, compared to positive effects for the other refugee females. There is also a $+15\%$ effect for Afghans with less than high school, with Afghan females in that group having a -19% effect. Thus, with controls, Afghan men with less than high school earn more than their counterparts, while Afghan women earn slightly less than their female counterparts. Finally, in addition to

a -20% effect for all people arriving in the U.S. at age 30 or older who currently have a college degree or higher, Afghans in this category have an additional -33% effect.

Model 8 adds employment. This removes the effects on earned income of employment levels in the different categories. Comparing Models 7 and 8 we can see how much underemployment affects the patterns in Model 7 and, of course, what effects remain after controlling for employment. The effects in Model 7 that are removed in Model 8 can be attributed to underemployment in that category. Afghan refugees' main effect in Model 8 is -2% and non-significant. Likewise, the Afghan female effect is $+2\%$ and non-significant. Thus, the substantial negative effects for these terms in Model 7 run through the underemployment of Afghan refugees, particularly Afghan women. After controlling for employment, cultural capital, immigration factors, mental and physical health, and a proxy for earning higher education degrees outside the U.S. there is no statistically significant direct Afghan refugee effect or Afghan female effect. The direct effects of the other three refugee groups are only slightly diminished or were increased by adding employment. Interestingly, after controlling for employment on earned income, the situation of Afghans with less than high school degrees flips in terms of gender. In Model 8, Afghans with less than high school have a -9% effect, while Afghan women without a high school degree have a $+15\%$ effect, meaning that among employed men, Afghan men earn 8% less than average, while among employed women without a high school degree, Afghan women earn 7% more. This flip makes sense when we recall that Afghan women in this category had extraordinarily low employment rates, while Afghan men in the same category had higher than average rates of employment. Finally, the proxies for having college and advanced degrees earned outside the U.S. are reduced modestly, but remain quite strong. Thus, these effects primarily reflect reduced income among those who are employed (e.g. medical doctor in Afghanistan working as a grocery store manager) and, to a much lesser extent, underemployment.

Discussion and conclusion

Using the U.S. Census and American Community Survey we examined a wealth of information on the economic integration of Afghan refugees. The first wave of Afghans arrived in the 1980s with a bifurcated distribution of formal education, higher rates of those with very little education and of those with university and professional degrees. First wave Afghan refugees have improved since 1990 on all measures of cultural and economic capital. Their median family incomes, personal earned incomes, employment levels, and percentage of adults with college degrees have all grown substantially. Yet, recent arrivals are not doing as well as the first wave was at the same length of time in the U.S. Further, controlling for cost of living, time in the U.S., education, English ability, and citizenship, Afghan refugees' earned income is the lowest of several comparison refugee and immigrant groups. This is substantially explained by the lower earnings of Afghan women, especially those with low and high levels of education; the lower earnings of Afghan refugees who earned university degrees outside the U.S.; and the poorer mental and physical health of Afghan refugees. The lower earnings of Afghan women are greatly influenced by their lower rates of employment, especially the least and most educated.

From a segmented assimilation perspective the lower earned incomes of Afghan refugees were influenced by several aspects of their context of reception. First, we found strong

evidence that many Afghans arriving with higher education and professional credentials cannot get them recognised or supplemented in the U.S. One of the strengths of segmented assimilation theory is that it problematises this exclusion instead of automatically attributing it to lower educational standards in Afghanistan. The success of a colleague's efforts at helping recent Afghan immigrants in the health professions retool and navigate credentialing hurdles lead us to believe that a systematic process of assessing, recognising, and augmenting credentials among newly arrived immigrants would greatly improve the economic outcomes for Afghan and other immigrants in similar positions. This view is supported by Bevelander and Pendakur's (2014) study of refugees in Canada and Sweden from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, and the former Yugoslavia. Afghans had relatively higher incomes and employment rates in Sweden than in Canada, as did all refugees with graduate degrees. A crucial difference between Canada and Sweden is that refugee integration in the latter entailed 1.5 years of training in a newcomer programme which includes providing 'immigrants with equivalencies for their schooling obtained outside Sweden (695)'. A similar equivalency assessment with the opportunity for supplemental training would significantly improve the employment rates and income levels of Afghans. The large population of recently arrived highly educated Afghan SIVs in the Sacramento, California area is fertile ground for a study of their barriers, resources, and strategies, or even a pilot programme testing the effectiveness of this approach.

The context of reception for Afghan refugees in the U.S. also includes a more egalitarian, less 'separate spheres' gender order that has contributed to significant tensions around gender roles among some Afghans in the U.S. Among the four refugee groups we looked at, only Afghans had a negative female interaction effect on earned income. Women in the other three refugee groups earned *more* than expected controlling for other factors (including a strong overall negative female gender effect they all shared). This finding parallels Bakker, Dagevos, and Engbersen's (2017) findings for Afghan refugees in the Netherlands (see also Frank and Hou 2015). The pattern of Afghan female employment, which is lowest among the least and most educated, calls for further research. Research should be sensitised by studies on the patriarchal family cultures and structures in Afghanistan (Grima 1992; Zulfacar 1998; Wimpelmann 2017), refugee women's 'bargains with patriarchy' (Kibria 1993), and an appreciation for the economic benefits of extended family strategies that include several adult earners in the household and place less educated or less employable females as homemakers. The New Jersey Afghans appear to have most successfully adopted and sustained an extended family household economic strategy and might be a location of special interest for researchers. Given the stark differences, we found between Afghans and Vietnamese in the prevalence and gendering of economic niches, research should also focus on efforts by low cultural capital female Afghans to network around employment and opportunities for schooling and English training, and obstacles to their success.

The adaptation of Afghans in the U.S. has also included significant stigmatisation targeting their Muslim religious identities which has grown and become more politicised in recent years. Levels of perceived discrimination are high among first and second generation Afghans, but we did not find research exploring how much this has influenced their economic integration (Alemi and Stempel 2018). ACS has no measures of perceived discrimination, but we hypothesise that a substantial part of the much stronger negative Afghan refugee effects in Model 4 (−19%) stems from discrimination. One might interpret

the shrinking of the negative 'Afghan refugee' effects in Models 5–7 as evidence that factors other than discrimination explain much of their lower incomes. However, we encourage a different interpretation: Models 5–7 may point to Afghan groups who are most targeted or harmed by discrimination (less educated women, those whose college degrees were earned outside the U.S.).

SAT emphasises that an immigrant group's strategy of adaptation is simultaneously a strategy of positioning their group in the U.S. field of race relations. Based on the evidence on the ethnic-racial makeup of their neighbourhoods in Afghans in the U.S. appear to be pursuing a strategy of living and sending their children to schools among higher income groups that are disproportionately immigrants and Asians. Although Afghan's economic characteristics are not unlike African Americans, some of whom share their religion, Afghans have generally avoided living in neighbourhoods with significant African American populations. These residential patterns coincide with their predominantly white, Asian, and mixed-race white and Asian racial identities. Research aimed at understanding the resources, decision making, and racial categories that shape these patterns may help understand Afghan strategies of positioning themselves in the U.S. ethnic-racial field. Here it may be relevant that an open-ended question asking northern Californian Afghan refugees what they valued most about the U.S. society drew the overwhelming response of 'the schools' or 'the education system' (Stempel 2009)

As noted in the introduction, SAT's failure to break with essentialist views of immigrant groups leans it to conceptualising settlement by unitary groups. We believe that the U.S. ethnic-racial field and the diversity of identity and boundary strategies of Afghan refugees and their children are not fully captured by the three pathways identified by SAT. Research focusing on the second generation informed by EBMT might link strategies of adaptation to Afghan's diverse configurations of Muslim, Afghan, American, 'intra-ethnic' (e.g. Pashtun, Tajik), and 'immigrant' identities linking these to contextual factors like the intense politicisation of immigration and Islam, and positions on gender roles. A plethora of questions, issues, and conceptualisations come into view, but we will mention one. While the patterns noted in the previous paragraph might be framed as evidence of straight-line assimilation into the 'mainstream', we suggest that many second generation Afghans are identifying with an economically successful 'cosmopolitan mainstream' that is forming in relation to an 'Anglo-conformist mainstream'. Along with the context of reception sketched above, this positioning may be influenced by Afghans' small group size and weaker internal social capital, their Muslim identities, their geographic locations and dispersion, their critiques of the 'traditional' Afghan gender order, and their strong value for education.

Regarding exposure to trauma, the modest mediating role of the crude index of physical and mental disability on the negative effect of Afghan refugees on earned income would likely be larger with better measures of psychological distress. A community survey of Afghan refugees in northern California (Stempel 2009) found that among working age adults an index measuring symptoms of distress was negatively associated with being employed, controlling for age, gender, education, English ability, and years in the U.S. Alemi and Stempel (2018) found that Afghan refugees who had experienced more traumatic events before and during migration had distress levels that were strongly influenced by their levels of perceived discrimination. Future work should explore more closely how

this interaction between vulnerability from traumatic experiences and perceived discrimination influences economic outcomes.

We close by mentioning other findings that deserve careful study. First, future work should ask what is causing the lower incomes and employment rate, and higher poverty rate of the current wave of Afghan refugees, compared to the first wave at the same point of their settlement? Is this a temporary pattern caused by the great recession? Is increased discrimination a factor? Second, we report considerable geographic variation in income levels and employment rates among Afghan refugees with significant changes over time. The economic stagnation and population decline of Queens, New York Afghans are particularly striking and deserve a special focus in future studies. Finally, future work must incorporate a more transnational context of integration. To mention just one factor, over half of Northern California Afghans reported that they sent remittances in the past year to family members in Afghanistan or neighbouring countries. Half of these reported experiencing significant financial hardship from this giving. Understanding how influential these and other transnational exchanges are in shaping family strategies should be a central focus of future work on Afghan economic integration.

Notes

1. Stempel and Alemi (2018) and online appendices expand on several topics covered in this paper.
2. The 2011–2015 American Community Survey estimates that 100,445 U.S. residents claim an Afghan ancestry. Just under 66% of these were born outside the U.S. and 95% of these arrived in the U.S. in 1980 or later (Ruggles et al. 2017).
3. Analysis of the 2006–15 ACS shows that over three-fifths (62 per cent) of Afghans in the US racially identify as ‘White’, with another 32 per cent identifying as either ‘White and Asian’ or ‘White’ and another Asian group (Ruggles et al. 2017).

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