

Understanding Immigrant Families From Around the World: Introduction to the Special Issue

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Investigations of immigrant families enable researchers to trace family processes and children's psychological adjustment in the presence of trenchant sociocultural change, cultural conflict, family dislocation, and the need for readjustment to new social environments. This special issue of 15 articles presents psychosocial research on immigrant families and children residing in Canada, Germany, Israel, the Netherlands, Portugal, and the United States. The articles focus on the psychosocial adaptation of immigrant families, parenting practices and their implications for child outcomes, and the importance of parent–adolescent relationships for adolescent mental health. Most of the articles are based on quantitative research methodologies. It is concluded that research on immigrant families is well suited to advance knowledge about the mutual dependence of dynamic sociocultural and family processes.

Keywords: immigrant families, immigrant children, mental health, parental behavior

At the dawn of the 21st century, international migration has become a major force in shaping the global society. Migration arises from forces that both push and pull families and individuals across the globe. Families decide to migrate for several reasons, including poverty, dangerous and destructive living conditions, the desire for political and individual freedom, or because they want to reside in a country offering increased opportunities for their children's growth, advanced education, and future prosperity. Following the stressful migration experience, the children of these families must face a broad array of challenges, such as leaving behind highly valued friendships in the old country, learning a new language, trying to fit into a completely new sociocultural environment, adjusting to a new education system, and at times fighting discrimination, prejudice, and feelings of social isolation.

In the majority of the cases, international migration involves families who move from poorer countries to wealthier ones. Countries located in Europe and North America frequently become the host countries for these new immigrants. Consequently, the 15 articles included in this special issue report psychosocial investigations of immigrant families and their children in a considerable variety of Western countries, including Canada, Germany, Israel, Portugal, the United States, and the Netherlands. Throughout the articles, much emphasis is placed on family processes and parental values, beliefs, and child-rearing practices, together with

their impact on the acculturation, social adjustment, mental health, educational trajectories, and friendship networks of children varying in age from infancy to late adolescence.

The special issue focuses on a broad range of families representing numerous ethnic groups located in Africa, Asia, North and South America, the Caribbean, and Europe. On one hand, these include several immigrant groups that have been much discussed in the North American social scientific literature, such as diverse Asian American and Latino American immigrant families. On the other hand, however, the contributions center on many groups that are only rarely discussed in North American social science journals. For instance, the article by the Portuguese psychologist Neto (2009) reports on the mental health of immigrant adolescents originating in Cape Verde, Angola, India, Mozambique, East Timor, Sao Tomé, and Guinea; two articles by Dwairy and Dor (2009) and Oznobishin and Kurman (2009), respectively, focus on the sometimes difficult adjustment experiences of Russian Jewish immigrants residing in Israel; Merz, Kocabas, Oort, and Schuengel (2009) examine notions of family solidarity among immigrants from Morocco, Suriname, the Dutch Antilles, and Turkey to the Netherlands; Titzmann and Silbereisen (2009) analyze friendship networks among ethnic German immigrant adolescents whose families returned after many years from post-Soviet countries to the land of their ancestors; and Luster et al. (2009) discuss the experiences of Sudanese refugees who were taken in by American foster families. When taken together, the articles in this issue analyze the psychosocial experiences of a surprisingly varied selection of immigrant families and their children who arrived in North America, Europe, and Israel from many corners of the world.

It is important to note in this context that the overall social and cultural conditions as well as the emotional

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climate of acceptance or rejection that host societies offer to their immigrant families and children will exert a major impact on the children's psychosocial adjustment. For example, Neto (2009) reports that Portuguese society traditionally has broadly accepted multiracial and multicultural immigrants, including those arriving from former Portuguese colonies located in Africa, South America, and Asia. In response to these favorable conditions, adolescents migrating from those areas tend to do well in Portuguese schools and report somewhat better psychosocial adjustment than their native peers. Neto's research results find a clear echo in several North American studies. In contrast, the studies contributed to this issue by Dwairy and Dor (2009) and Oznobishin and Kurman (2009), respectively, suggest that in Israel, Russian immigrants experience higher family-related stress levels than their native Israeli peers, in part because they and their families feel pressured to conform culturally and linguistically to an assimilationist ideology. Thus, the diverse and sometimes contrasting findings about Asian and other immigrants in Canada and the United States; African, Indian, and South American immigrants in Portugal; and Russian immigrants in Israel suggest strongly that only by studying immigrant families and children across a broad range of societies can we evaluate the validity and limitations of generalizations derived from North American research.

The articles in this special issue are divided into three sections. The first three articles make up the first section, "The Adaptation of Immigrant Families and Children," and they center on broad economic, cultural-ideological, and group-oriented forces that help shape the lives of immigrant children and adolescents in North America and Europe. The second section, "Parenting Practices and the Implications for Child Outcomes," includes six articles that investigate ethnic differences in parenting practices and their consequences for child development. These articles focus on Asian American children and adolescents, with Chinese American and Chinese Canadian children of varying ages being especially well represented. By comparing these articles, the reader can gain a detailed understanding of how children are socialized in immigrant families originating in Confucian-heritage societies and of how these socialization practices helped shape the personalities and psychosocial adjustment of children and adolescents. The third section, "Parent-Adolescent Relationships and Adolescent Mental Health," includes six articles that analyze indicators of adolescents' and young adults' psychosocial adjustment and mental health as a function of familial and societal conditions.

The Adaptation of Immigrant Families and Children

Traditionally, influences related to economic and social class have been considered among the main forces shaping the psychosocial adaptation and welfare of immigrant families and their children. In their article, Mistry, Benner, Tan, and Kim (2009) examine the impact of family economic stress on the academic achievement, school engagement, and education-related attitudes of Chinese American ado-

lescents. The authors found that parental perceptions of economic stress were associated with lower academic achievement among their adolescent children.

When immigrant families from non-Western societies migrate to relatively secular and individualistic Western countries such as the Netherlands, those individuals are sometimes found to endorse collectivistic ideologies of family solidarity and cohesiveness. In their article, Merz et al. (2009) report on a large-scale Dutch survey of immigrants that investigated value differences between first- and second-generation immigrants from four non-Western countries. First-generation immigrants placed more emphasis on notions of family solidarity than did second-generation immigrants, as did those immigrants who were more religious than their peers.

In recent decades, ethnic German immigrants have returned from various post-Soviet countries to the land of their ancestors even though their families might have resided for several generations outside Germany. Investigating the acculturation of these ethnic German immigrants in their new homeland, Titzmann and Silbereisen (2009) found that friendship homophily (the tendency to prefer intraethnic to interethnic friends) decreased slowly over time and that lower levels of friendship homophily were associated with increased use of the German language rather than Russian.

Parenting Practices and the Implications for Child Outcomes

Cheah, Leung, Tahseen, and Schultz (2009) examined mothers of preschoolers with the specific focus on mothers' authoritative practices. They report that Chinese mothers were highly supportive of authoritative practices and that to an extent, mothers' psychological well-being, perceived support in their parenting role, and parenting stress were linked to their levels of endorsement of authoritative behaviors.

Focusing on several dimensions of parenting behavior such as control, acceptance, and child training, Huntsinger and Jose's (2009) longitudinal study found that Chinese American parents sent more consistent parenting messages to their children than did European American parents. Only Chinese parents viewed "training" behaviors as relevant to child rearing, thus reflecting a culturally bounded view of parenting.

Chuang and Su (2009) investigated mothers' and fathers' beliefs regarding various aspects of child rearing. They compared Chinese Canadian and mainland Chinese parents of infants, finding that Chinese Canadian parents were more supportive of authoritative child-rearing practices, whereas Chinese parents were more likely to report authoritarian practices.

Chao (2009) compared Asian American immigrant adolescents with their nonimmigrant European American peers. Chao examined how adolescents perceived their parents' levels of control within the context of their affective interpretations. She found that adolescents' levels of anger to-

ward parental control may serve a protective function for European Americans but not for Asian immigrants.

The next two articles move away from parenting practices to other aspects of parent-child relationships. First, Cote and Bornstein's (2009) article explores mother-child play interactions among South American Latino, Japanese, and European American mothers and their 20-month-old children in the United States. The authors stress the importance of investigating universal processes of child development, such as cultural universals in the expression of (at least some) developmentally important processes.

Tasopoulos-Chan, Smetana, and Yau (2009) examined adolescents' strategies of disclosure to their parents by comparing American adolescents of Chinese, Mexican, and European backgrounds. The findings provide insight into the cultural nature of parent-adolescent communication and the nature of their relationships.

Parent-Adolescent Relationships and Adolescent Mental Health

Neto's (2009) article presents a comparative study of immigrant youths of various ethnic backgrounds and native Portuguese youths. Although immigrant youths reported fewer mental health issues than native youths, the strongest predictive factors of the youths' mental health status were their perceptions of discrimination and negative sociocultural adjustment.

Luster et al.'s (2009) article represents the only qualitative study in this issue. On the basis of detailed accounts by Sudanese youths, the authors described their unique stresses and challenges as unaccompanied refugees who, as children, were separated from their parents under dramatic circumstances before being placed in American foster families.

Juang and Cookston (2009) investigated family obligations and values of Chinese American adolescents and their association with mental health over a 2-year period. First-generation and firstborn youth reported higher levels of family obligations than did their American-born counterparts. In addition, adolescents who reported more family obligations had fewer mental health issues.

Family obligations and adolescent mental health were also examined by Oznobishin and Kurman (2009) in terms of role reversal. They compared two cohorts of immigrants from the former Soviet Union with their Israeli-born peers. The results revealed that immigrants who assumed these parental roles and responsibilities in their families perceived less family support and recognition compared with their Israeli-born counterparts.

In another study on Israeli immigrants from the former Soviet Union, Dwairy and Dor (2009) compared samples of former Soviet immigrant and native Israeli adolescents with respect to issues of parental control, inconsistency, rejection, perceptions of family connectedness, and psychological disorders. The findings revealed that adolescent immigrants from the former Soviet Union felt less connected with their families while experiencing less warmth and

more inconsistent parenting and parental control than their native counterparts.

Continuing the focus on adolescents' perceived parental support, Kim (2009) investigated Chinese American father-adolescent and mother-adolescent dyads. Parents' and adolescents' levels of acculturation were examined together in relation to adolescents' perceptions of parental parenting and depressive symptoms. The results revealed that greater acculturative differences between parent and adolescent were linked to adolescents' perceptions of parental support and greater experiences with depressive symptoms and more conflicts with their parents.

Conclusions

This special issue both deepens and broadens our understanding of immigration-related family processes. Our knowledge is deepened because many of the articles analyze in considerable detail various aspects of parenting, parent-child relationships, and child outcomes, such as the behavior and psychosocial adjustment of children. For some groups, including Chinese American and Chinese Canadian families, we are now in a better position to ask increasingly sophisticated and detailed questions about family life. For other immigrant groups, however, our knowledge is sketchier, and so the research reported in this issue about these groups is of a pioneering nature.

This special issue also broadens our knowledge of immigrant families because the articles cover such a wide range of cultures and countries. We are led to a better understanding of what may be universal, what could be semiuniversal, and what might be culture specific in the responses of families to the process of immigration and the ensuing attempts to acculturate to the new society. Because several of the respective authors have used methods that allowed them to view family processes through the eyes of both parents and their adolescent children, we are in a better position to understand the multifold intricacies and inconsistencies that are inherent in family dynamics and relationships.

From a methodological point of view, it is important to note that several of the studies include longitudinal, multi-informant, and multimethodological approaches and that most of the articles are of a quantitative nature. Future research on immigrant families would profit from increased use of mixed quantitative-qualitative research methods, the deployment of longitudinal research designs that can be used to trace causal connections between variables, and the use of multiple informants whose combined perspectives are well suited to arriving at a richer and more comprehensive understanding of the processes that shape immigrant family life. The use of multiple methods is also appropriate for exploring nested contexts that surround immigrant families and, at the same time, are intertwined with family processes. These contexts include the host society; cultural belief systems stemming from the immigrants' original culture; the mass media; the community in which the family resides; economic, legal, educational, and artistic institu-

tions; and social networks including coethnic and indigenous colleagues and friends.

Family psychologists are increasingly recognizing the importance of sociocultural context to a better understanding of family processes. The study of immigrant families and children, although by its very nature highly complex, provides an ideal if challenging approach to advancing our knowledge about how dynamic societal and cultural processes are intertwined with family processes. Taken together, the articles contained in this issue advance our knowledge about both the profound impact of the immigration experience on family relationships and the methodological approaches that might be best suited to the psychological investigation of families and children over time.

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