



Immigration, Acculturation and Parenting

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Topic

Immigration

Subject

Over 200 million individuals worldwide are international migrants. Immigration involves a displacement with significant effects on family life, not least because of the cultural shifts inherent in resettlement. An emergent body of research is focused on the implications of immigration and acculturation for parenting.

Introduction and Research Context

Parenting occupies a central node in the nexus between culture and adaptive human development.

Parents of each generation have the important and continuing task to enculturate the next generation: that is, to prepare children to function competently in the physical, economic, and psychosocial situations that are characteristic of their culture.¹ Optimal child adaptation is achieved through socialization processes that involve inculcating culture. Culture-specific patterns of parenting make for variations in childrearing practices that can be subtle, but are always meaningful in meeting a specific society's setting and needs. While parents in all societies are expected to nurture and protect young children,^{2,3} culture influences a wide array of family functions including roles, decision-making patterns, and cognitions and practices related to childrearing and child development.^{4,5,6} Parenting may be subjected to complex transformations when families emigrate from one society to settle in another.

Key Research Questions

- To what extent do immigrant parents' caregiving cognitions and practices change when they migrate from one culture to another?
- What unique challenges do immigrant parents face in acculturating?

- How do immigration and acculturation affect parenting and, so, child development?

Recent Research Results

Parental acculturation

Immigration requires acculturation. Acculturation entails processes of cultural and psychological change – for example in customs, language, values – that take place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members.⁷ Immigration and acculturation are disorganizing and reorganizing experiences, necessitating alterations of social identity and self-image. Immigrants must negotiate new cultures and learn to navigate multiple new and different systems, often without the support of familiar social networks. Acculturation requires adjusting responses of engrained life scripts to compensate for cultural differences and disruption of familiar family roles.

Immigrant parents bring with them on their journey from their original cultural context conceptual models of the successful parent and how to rear a child properly. When they migrate to a new culture, they find that socialization agents in the receiving culture, such as other parents, teachers and professionals, may possess different images of the successful parent and different strategies for childrearing.⁸ This circumstance prompts most acculturating parents to become bicultural in some degree, simultaneously adopting cognitions and practices of their new culture while retaining those of their old one.^{9,10} In acculturating, immigrant parents must decide which cognitions or practices to retain from their indigenous culture, which to modify, and which new conventions to adopt. Cultural adaptation (to conform to the receiving culture) is often preferred in the public domain and cultural maintenance (of customs from the old culture) in the private domain. For example, Turkish and Moroccan immigrant parents in the Netherlands attribute more importance to cultural maintenance in the home and family context but consider adaptation more important in work situations.¹¹

Research shows that immigrants do not always readily adopt cognitions of the receiving culture, and culturally significant parenting beliefs and norms tend to resist change.^{12,13} For example, Chinese Canadian transnational parents opt to allow grandparents to care for their infants, based on expectations of their culture of origin, despite emotional hardship and disapproval within the receiving culture.¹⁴ Generally, parenting practices appear to migrate more readily than cognitions. For example, Japanese immigrant mothers' cognitions remain close to the cognitions of mothers in Japan, or are intermediate between those of Japanese and European American mothers, whereas their practices change to resemble those of European American mothers more closely than those of Japanese.^{15,16,17,18} In addition, different immigrant groups retain and adopt culture-specific cognitions and practices differently.¹⁹ Immigrant mothers from South America share more cognitions and practices with U.S. American mothers in their culture of destination than mothers in their cultures of origin.^{15,16}

Additional challenges to immigrant parents

Immigrant parents may be misunderstood and judged for any unorthodox practices by educational, mental health, or child welfare services that are not familiar with the family's culture of origin.²⁰ They may routinely be evaluated based on culture-of-destination constructs and measures.²¹ Immigrant parents may further experience significant loss in their effectiveness – as a result of systemic constraints on their ability to influence their new environment on behalf of their children – for example when negotiating an unfamiliar educational system.²² Parents with high academic aspirations for their children but little education themselves may be less comfortable with the school system. They may not be in a position to help their children with school work, experience cultural constraints with regard to dealing with educational authority figures, and thus negotiate with teachers and administrators less effectively.

Moreover, peers and schools exert major socializing influences on youth, and this can result in children becoming more quickly acculturated than their parents.²³ Because immigrant families straddle two cultures, tension and conflict in the family might arise between parents, who wish to inculcate traditional beliefs in their offspring, and children, who wish to conform to and be accepted by peers in their culture of destination.²⁴

In the process of migration, parents typically undergo profound transformations that can be complicated by extended periods of potentially damaging separation from their children.²⁵ Rearing children transnationally entails special challenges.²⁶ When family separations have been protracted, attachment difficulties have been noted as children miss their known caregivers and withdraw from estranged biological parents upon reunification. Resulting parental disappointment, stress, and depression are common as are difficulties in re-establishing relationships with and authority over children. The ambivalence and guilt experienced by parents who separate from their children during migration is justified.¹⁴ Indeed, children who are separated from their parents are more likely to report depressive symptoms than children who have not been separated.²⁷

Impact of immigration and acculturation

Although relatively little is known about the influence of immigrant status and acculturation on the parenting of young children,²⁸ immigrant parents are exposed to numerous acculturative stressors and are often at heightened risk for parenting stress and other mental health vulnerabilities.^{29,30} Furthermore, migration often brings parental adaptation difficulty, lack of time with their children, and language barriers that may destabilize parent-child relationships.^{31,32} This is described as dissonant acculturation³³ – “when children’s learning of English and American ways and simultaneously loss of the immigrant culture outstrip their parents.” Dissonant acculturation often leads to increasing parent-child conflicts in immigrant families and adaptation challenges for children.^{34,35,36}

Research Gaps

The study of the interplay among family immigration, acculturation, and parenting is still novel and suffers many gaps and unanswered questions.

- Is there conclusive evidence that efficient parental acculturation to the receiving culture presents any advantages / disadvantages to the children of immigrants?
- If rapid acculturation is indicated, does a shift in parental cognitions have to precede behaviour for parenting practices to change?
- How do immigrant parents feel about changing their parenting beliefs and practices?
- What reasons do they give for holding on to – or for abandoning – cultural beliefs and practices from their culture of origin?
- Can cognitions and practices from the immigrant parents' culture of origin be integrated into their new life, and play a fully or partially useful role in the receiving culture?
- If so, what adaptations, if any, may be functional?
- How can receiving cultures be more open to the integration of cognitions and practices stemming from immigrants' cultures of origin into mainstream culture-of-destination beliefs about child development?

Conclusion

Immigration and acculturation are major transforming forces on families. Immigrant parents wish to promote their children's positive development by providing a better economic standard of living, good nutrition, access to health care, a safe living environment, and educational and employment opportunities. This is why parents make great sacrifices for their children, often moving to a new continent and culture at great economic, physical, and psychological costs.

When parents migrate to a new culture they carry with them from their culture of origin implicit knowledge of childrearing and goals for the development of their offspring, but they encounter new implicit cognitions and explicit practices concerning childrearing in their culture of destination. Acculturation therefore involves negotiation between the parenting cognitions and practices of the two cultures. There are large individual and group differences in the ways people go about acculturating, in the degree to which they achieve satisfactory adaptations, and in their types of adaptation. More research is needed about the impact of immigrant status and acculturation on parenting and child development.

Implications for Parents, Services and Policy

Adequate community support services must be made available for immigrant families, as parents who immigrate to enhance their children's circumstances may nevertheless initially find themselves confronted with unexpected parenting challenges, many of which are related to acculturation. In addition to internal struggles inherent in resettlement, and loss of existing social networks, migrating parents also often have to deal with the critical appraisal of their time-honoured practices by well-meaning authorities and their own children. Service providers who engage with immigrant parents need to strike a balance between supporting families in acculturating and respecting valued aspects of parents' cultural heritage. Clinicians should be aware of the limitations of the still largely Eurocentric tools and standards used in the fields of parenting and

child development. They should have access to education in the meaning of parenting beliefs and practices from cultures other than the mainstream culture. Organized efforts are needed to integrate into the mainstream – when appropriate – an acceptance of diverse, culture-specific parenting practices, most of which are ultimately designed to optimize children’s life chances. Last but not least, immigration policies should facilitate family reunification.

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To learn more on this topic, consult the following sections of the Encyclopedia:

- [Immigration](#)
- [According to experts](#)

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