Introduction

Immigration is the physical relocation of a person (and is typically thought of as relocation to another country), whereas acculturation refers to the psychological adjustment of the individual who has experienced relocation. Both immigration and acculturation are personally transformative experiences. Thus, we would expect that the act of immigrating and the process of acculturating alter children’s development in significant ways. This article briefly describes the state of our knowledge of immigrant children’s psychological development.

Subject

It has been estimated that approximately 200 million people currently live outside their country of birth or citizenship for a variety of reasons, including demographic growth, climate change, educational opportunities, financial insecurity, or political instability. Thus immigration and acculturation are relevant to the study of children’s development. Despite the large numbers of immigrants and immigrant children worldwide, too little is known about how immigration and acculturation influence children’s development. In addition, the overwhelming majority of research on children’s development has been conducted with European and North American middle-class children. Thus, we know very little about how immigrant children’s development is similar to or different from that of European or North American middle-class children, nor what the developmental significance of any differences might be.

Problems

The bulk of research on immigrant and minority children has focused on risk behaviours in adolescence, such as drug use, teen pregnancy, and school failure or failure to assimilate. For example, the majority of immigrants to the United States (using the Census designation “foreign-born”) were from Latin America (using data from
the 2000 Census, and Latino children in the United States have been described as being more likely to be born into single-parent households and to parent(s) with low levels of education and low levels of income. Although such descriptions may characterize most Latino children in the United States (who are primarily of Mexican origin), they do not accurately describe Latino children whose parents originated in other Latin American countries. For example, Latino immigrants from South America to the United States tend to be well-educated professionals. Latinos in the United States differ not only in terms of culture of origin, but also reasons for immigration, socioeconomic status, and generational level, all of which can each influence children’s development. Although the particular issues of concern regarding immigrant children’s development may differ across countries, research typically deals with problem behaviours, regardless of country.

Two major problems with the body of research on immigration and acculturation in childhood are:

- It has focused on problem behaviours and not on how immigrant children experience normative developmental events. Thus, the research has not allowed for the discovery that immigrant children may be faring quite well in some areas.
- Second, the research on immigrant children has also often confounded ethnicity, immigrant status, and socioeconomic status. Failure to account for important sources of variability within “Latinos” or “Asian” Americans, for example, has led to tendencies to inaccurately group and unfairly stereotype immigrant children.

Research Context

Most research on immigrant children’s development adopts a deficit model, focuses on adolescents and not infants or younger children, and suffers from small and/or demographically heterogenous samples. Moreover, much research historically has been an extension of cultural stereotypes (e.g., looking at teenage pregnancy among American Latino youth, exploring academic performance among Asian American youth).

Key Research Questions

The key research questions with respect to immigration and acculturation in childhood that should be asked are:

- Do immigrant children differ from their non-immigrant peers with respect to attainment of important developmental milestones? (For example, learning to speak or learning to read, particularly when immigrant children reside in bilingual homes.)
- If so, what is the developmental significance of these differences? (For example, some research has suggested that the vocabulary development of immigrant toddlers lags behind that of their monolingual peers, but does that matter in the long run? In the short term, these children might be flagged for early intervention services with respect to language development, but in the long term they may benefit from the cognitive and social advantages that being able to speak/read/write two languages confers.)

Recent Research Results

Most research on younger immigrant children’s development has centred on bilingual language acquisition and immigrant children’s subsequent academic performance. However, recent research has also explored diverse
topics such as immigrant children’s beliefs about schooling, children’s physical development and health, gender roles, temperament, play, and immigrant parents’ involvement with their children, beliefs about parenting, motherhood, and emotional health. For example, play among Latino immigrants from South America and Japanese immigrants is similar to each other and more like the play of European American mothers and toddlers (in the culture of destination) than mothers and toddlers in the cultures of origin (Argentina, Japan), suggesting that behaviours acculturate relatively quickly, at least for these two immigrant groups. In contrast, research on parenting beliefs suggest that South American-Latino immigrant and Japanese immigrant mothers’ knowledge of parenting and infant development is dissimilar to European American mothers and more like mothers in the cultures of origin (Argentina, Japan), suggesting that beliefs acculturate relatively slowly. Mother and infant play behaviours of similar kind were significantly positively related for South American- Latino immigrant and Japanese immigrant dyads, as well as for mothers in the cultures of origin (Argentina, Japan) and culture of destination (European-American mothers in the United States), suggesting that concordance in mother-infant play interactions may be cross-culturally universal (and unchanged by immigration). Finally, contemporary research has attempted to understand and explain results from the perspective of indigenous cultures of origin, rather than from a culture of destination (European or North American) perspective.

Research Gaps

First, we need to know more about how immigrant children achieve normative developmental milestones, whether their developmental trajectories differ from those of majority children, and what the developmental significance of any differences may be. Second, research on immigrant children has tended to focus on adolescents, and we know less about the development of infants and young children from immigrant families (when intervention, if necessary, might prove most productive). Finally, we know less about within-group variability than desirable. For example, many times Latino youth are lumped together in American research studies, even though immigrants to the United States from different Latin American communities differ from each other in a variety of ways.

Conclusions

The large and growing numbers of immigrants around the world, and our dearth of knowledge about them, necessitate that we learn more about immigrant children’s normative development, their needs and their strengths. These factors also require that we pay particular attention to areas of well-being that may not be as great an issue with non-migrant children and families. For example, the stress of migration may make immigrant mothers more susceptible to depression than non-migrant mothers, and depression affects parenting and children’s development adversely. Immigrants may have a particularly difficult time adjusting to their new culture if the migration is not voluntary (as in the case of refugees) or if immigrants are socially isolated (from either family, friends or cultural community). What is known about immigrant families suggests that childrearing beliefs tend to be more consistent over time and slower to acculturate than either children’s behaviours or parent practices. Most research results present a picture of strengths as well as areas for improvement in immigrant children’s lives.

Implications for Parents, Services, and Policy
Perhaps the most important implication of immigration and acculturation for parents, service providers and policy makers is that we cannot assume that patterns of parenting and child development that are true for majority families are also true for immigrant families. Although the U.S., for example, prides itself on being “a nation of immigrants,” acculturation to majority group norms is no longer enforced, service providers are likely to find themselves with culturally-diverse groups of children, and policy makers with culturally-diverse groups of constituents. Thus, just as immigrants are learning about and adapting to their new country, it behoves practitioners and policy makers to learn more about the cultural beliefs and practices of their service population so that they may better support them. For example, the work of U.S. pediatricians (80% of whom are European-American) can be enhanced by better understanding of parents’ knowledge of children’s development, which varies greatly by culture. However, research suggests that physicians’ knowledge of other cultures is deficient. For example, in a survey of resident physicians, 25% reported that they felt ill-prepared to care for new immigrants, 25% felt insecure caring for patients who hold beliefs at odds with Western medicine, and 25% felt that they lacked skills to identify cultural customs that impact medical care.

Increasing parents’ knowledge of cultural beliefs and expectations about child development in the country of destination, and increasing service providers’ and policy makers’ knowledge of immigrant parents’ cultural beliefs about child rearing and normative child development, are key to creating partnerships that will foster the growth and well-being of all of children.

References


