

IMMIGRATION

Immigration and Acculturation in Childhood

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Introduction

Immigration is the physical relocation of a person (and is typically thought of as relocation to another country). People who have experienced international relocation are typically referred to as immigrants or international migrants. Acculturation refers to the psychological adjustment of the individual who has experienced relocation. Both immigration and acculturation are personally transformative experiences.^{1,2} 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

Immigration and acculturation are not new phenomena, but the percentage of the world's population that are immigrants (international migrants) has increased steadily over the past 40 years and is projected to continue increasing.³ Current estimates indicate that approximately 272 million people (1 in 30) currently live outside their country of birth or citizenship; 12 percent of whom are children.^{3,4} The United States has the largest number of immigrants in absolute terms but other countries such as Canada have a large proportion of immigrants (more than 1 in 5

residents are foreign-born), and immigration is not uniquely American.^{3,5} Individuals migrate for a variety of reasons, including employment or educational opportunities, family reunification, natural disasters, persecution, or political instability.^{2,3} Children overwhelmingly migrate with a parent (or to join parents) and thus have little choice about their migration. In the United States, currently more than one-quarter of American children are either immigrants or have at least one immigrant parent.⁶ Given the increasing numbers of immigrant children and children raised by immigrants worldwide, both in absolute numbers and proportionally, combined with the fact that most of the research on human development has focused on WEIRD populations (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic)⁷, immigration and acculturation are critical to a full understanding of child development. Despite their large and growing numbers, we know relatively little about how immigration and acculturation influence children's development even though, because they are transformative experiences, we expect them to shape children's development in fundamental ways.

Problems

Major problems with the body of research on immigration and acculturation in childhood include:

- The overwhelming majority of research on children's development has been conducted with North American and European middle-class children, and as a result, we know little about how immigrant children's development varies in different cultural contexts.
- 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.
- As a consequence of the focus on problem behaviours, the bulk of research on immigrant children focuses on adolescents and not young children.
- The research on immigrant children has often confounded immigrant status, ethnicity, 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 young children, confounds immigrant status with other sociodemographic variables, and suffers from small and/or demographically heterogeneous samples. Moreover, much research historically has been an extension of cultural stereotypes (e.g., looking at teenage pregnancy among American Latinx 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, when we know that in the United States, for example, most immigrant children are being raised in bilingual homes).⁸
- 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, or write in two languages confers.)
- How can service providers (psychologists, social workers, schools, religious organizations, pediatricians and policy makers) assist with immigrant children's successful adaptation to the country of destination, if such support is needed?

Recent Research Results

Most research on younger immigrant children's development has centred on bilingual language acquisition^{9,10} and immigrant children's academic performance.^{11,12} However, research in the past decade has explored topics as diverse as immigrant children's health and physical development,^{13,14,15} gender development,^{16,17} mother-infant interaction,^{18,19,20} and immigrant parents' emotional socialization,^{21,22} parenting practices (e.g., feeding,^{23,24} praise and encouragement,²⁵ discipline,²⁶ intrusiveness²⁷), parenting styles,²⁸ and mental health,²⁹ for example. Three trends in recent research are noteworthy. First, research in the past decade has begun to focus on immigrant

groups more specifically (e.g., South Korean) rather than generally (e.g., “Asian”), along with the acknowledgement that our conclusions may apply specifically and not necessarily generally. For example, research on mother-infant interactions in immigrant families show that both South Korean immigrant and Japanese immigrant mothers responded to their infants’ person-directed interactions more than they initiated them.^{18,20} However, South Korean immigrant mothers initiated object-directed interactions with their infants more than they responded to their infants and there were no differences in initiation and responsiveness for Japanese immigrant dyads’ object-directed interactions.^{18,20} Second, research has begun to focus on the developmental sequelae of family experiences for young children in immigrant families. For example, research shows that immigrant mothers’ acculturation levels in infancy influence the percentage of time bilingual mothers speak the heritage language or English to their children, which in turn influences toddlers’ vocabulary development in each of the languages (and this appears to be true generally).⁹ As another example, in Japanese immigrant families, mothers’ responsiveness to their infants’ object-directed behavior was positively related to the children’s symbolic play in toddlerhood, which in turn was positively related to their language skills in early childhood.¹⁹

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. For example, although developmental psychologists in the United States and Europe emphasize the importance of maternal responsiveness to infants’ behavioral initiations for the development of a child’s sense of agency and autonomy, in South Korean immigrant families, the greater responsiveness of infants to their mothers’ initiation in object-directed interactions can be interpreted as infants becoming socialized into the South Korean virtues of *jull-ze* (moderating one’s desires to maintain harmony) and *zeung-zee* (respecting one’s parents teachings and will).¹⁸

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, although this is beginning to change, 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 parenting practices, although there is some cultural variability in this.^{2,20,21} Most research results present a picture of strengths as well as areas where immigrant children could be better supported.

Implications for Parents, Services, and Policy

Perhaps the most important implication of immigration and acculturation for parents, service providers, and policy makers is to recognize that immigrant parents have implicit cultural beliefs and childrearing goals and practices, just as service providers and policy makers do, and these deeply held, unspoken ideas about what is "best" for children may differ. Thus, just as immigrants are learning about and adapting to their new country, it behooves practitioners and policy makers to learn more about the cultural beliefs and practices of their service population so that they can better support immigrant families. For example, immigrant parents may hold ideas about the genesis and treatment of disease that are very different from physicians' ideas.³⁰ Clinicians may hold inaccurate beliefs about bilingualism or preference monolingualism even though this does not reflect the current state of knowledge of bilingualism in early childhood.³¹ The American Academy of Pediatrics' recent policy statement on caring for immigrant children,³⁰ which addresses the need for practitioners' cultural understanding, is a step in the right direction.

In conclusion, 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.

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