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Intergenerational Differences in Acculturation

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Introduction

A major issue confronted by immigrant children and their families is the acculturation gap that emerges between generations over time. The process of acculturation begins when immigrants enter a new country and involves changes in language, behaviour, attitudes and values. Children become involved in the new culture relatively quickly, particularly if they attend school, but their parents may never acquire sufficient comfort with the new language and culture to become socially integrated into their new country. In addition, immigrant children may have few opportunities to participate in and learn about their heritage culture. As a result, immigrant parents and children increasingly live in different cultural worlds.[1,2] Such "acculturation gaps"[3,4,5] have been linked to family conflict and adjustment.[1,2,6,7,8]

Subject

Acculturation gaps are problematic because they make family communication and mutual understanding difficult. For adult immigrants their native language will remain primary, even many years after resettlement. Yet most children learn the new language very quickly, becoming conversationally proficient within 1-2 years, and attaining academic mastery of the language

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within 5-7.[9] When immigrant children have no formal educational instruction in their heritage language, it becomes increasingly difficult for them to discuss abstract concepts and complex issues with their parents as they mature.

Parents and children may also misunderstand one another because of cultural differences in expectations for parent and child behaviour and family relationships. Immigrant parents may endorse cultural beliefs that children must put family needs before their own, and that adolescents should delay dating or even avoid friendships with members of the opposite sex. Immigrant parents may also have strict and controlling parenting styles that in their heritage culture are considered warm and attentive to the child,[10] but that in the host culture are considered authoritarian. At the same time, adolescents may embrace the opportunity to engage in unsupervised activities and behaviours that may be normative in the host society (such as dating) but unacceptable in their heritage culture and to their parents. They may also resent strict parenting styles when they see their peers' parents practice more permissive parenting.

The "acculturation gap hypothesis" stipulates that acculturation discrepancies between parents and children create family conflict and discord. Such family conflict, in turn, leads to difficulties in children's adjustment psychologically, at school and in other life domains.

Problems

A growing number of studies assess acculturation gaps in immigrant families, but some have argued that acculturation gaps may not always occur in the direction stipulated by the acculturation gap hypothesis, and the negative impact of acculturation gaps may be overstated.[11] There is a range of ways that researchers have operationalized the acculturation gap. Measures of acculturation dissonance ask adolescents to report on their perceptions of cultural differences or conflict between them and their parents.[12]

Other studies assess acculturation of adolescents and parents and then compute the gaps, most often by subtracting one from the other. Some studies ask parents to report on their perceptions of their children's acculturation;[13] others ask adolescents to report on their perceptions of their parents' acculturation.[14,11] Increasingly, researchers ask parents and children to report on their own acculturation independently and then compute the gaps.[2,8]

When computed by researchers, gaps do not always occur in the expected direction. The acculturation gap hypothesis stipulates that parents are more acculturated to the heritage

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culture than their children, and adolescents are more acculturated to the new culture than their parents. However, some studies have found families where adolescents are more attached to the heritage culture than their parents[11] and/or parents are more acculturated to some aspects of the new culture than their adolescents.[1] Thus, it is either the case that acculturation gaps do not occur as stipulated by the theory, or existing measures of the gap do not capture the phenomenon accurately.

Research Context

The majority of acculturation gap research is based on questionnaire studies of immigrant families. This research has largely focused on adolescents because they are in a developmental stage when many of them are embarking on gaining independence from their parents. For immigrant youth, gaining independence is also associated with forging a new cultural identity.

Studies include first, second or later generation immigrant adolescents. Some restrict their samples to first generation immigrant children and their parents;[1] some focus on children of immigrant parents born in the host culture;[15] still others include mixed samples and do not specify generational status or conduct separate analyses by generational status.[16,8]

Key Research Questions

- Do acculturation gaps predict difficulties in adolescent adjustment?
- Do acculturation gaps predict family conflict or other problems in family adjustment?
- Is the impact of acculturation gaps on adolescent outcomes mediated by family adjustment, such that acculturation gaps lead to family conflict, which in turn contributes to problems in adolescents' adjustment?

Recent Research Results

- Do acculturation gaps predict difficulties in adolescent adjustment?

Research shows that both acculturation gaps and cultural dissonance between parents and adolescents are linked to adolescent adjustment, including depression, problem behaviours and academic achievement. Symptoms of depression were linked to parent-child acculturation dissonance for Chinese-American adolescents.[12] Two studies found that gaps in Chinese language proficiency or use were linked to symptoms of depression for Chinese-Canadian[7] and Chinese-

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American adolescents.[16] Past-year and lifetime incidence of depression were predicted by acculturation gaps in studies of Muslim-American college students,[17] Chinese-American adolescents, and parents of Chinese descent.[18]

With respect to problem behaviours, acculturation dissonance predicts self-reports of violent behaviours in Chinese and Southeast-Asian heritage youth in the United States.[19] Youth who reported acculturation dissonance were more likely to associate with delinquent peers, and this in turn was linked to violent behaviour. In another study, alcohol and tobacco use was also associated with acculturation gaps in heritage culture for Mexican-American adolescents.[20] Discrepancies between Latino adolescents' acculturation and how acculturated they thought their parents wanted them to be have been studied.[21] When this discrepancy increased from Grade 9 to 10, substance abuse also increased.

Academic achievement has been predicted by acculturation gaps in several studies. Gaps in Chinese language proficiency predict lower academic achievement for Chinese-Americans.[16] Gaps in Chinese language use and media use predict decreased achievement motivation for Chinese-Canadian adolescents.[7]

Contrary to expectations, Indian adolescents in Britain who were less Western-oriented than their mothers and more heritage culture-oriented than their fathers were more likely to have symptoms of internalizing disorders.[22] Similarly, Mexican-American adolescents who were more aligned with their heritage culture than their parents experience more conduct problems.[11] These studies affirm the importance of cultural gaps between parents and children for adolescent adjustment, but the nature of these gaps is opposite to what is predicted and raises questions about acculturation gap theory.

- Do acculturation gaps predict problems in family adjustment?

Family conflict has been linked to acculturation gaps in a number of studies with different populations. Family conflict was predicted by acculturation gaps in Chinese language use[7] and behavioural and psychological acculturation[23] for Chinese-Canadian adolescents. Father-child gaps in degree of assimilation were related to parent-child conflict for Mexican-American families.[24] Conflict was also higher in Indian-American families when parents and adolescents were not matched on acculturation style.[15] Gaps in heritage language competence predicted conflict in former Soviet[1] and Vietnamese[6] American families. In addition, gaps in Vietnamese

and American identity were linked to conflict in Vietnamese and former Soviet families, respectively. Finally, Chinese-American immigrant mothers who perceived larger gaps with their pre-adolescent children were more likely to report less success in parenting.[13]

Two studies, did not find clear evidence of impact of gaps on several measures of family adjustment. In a study of Mexican-American adolescents, acculturation gaps in heritage culture and American acculturation did not predict family adjustment.[8] In families where parents were very involved with their heritage culture, high involvement with American culture by adolescents was linked to lower family cohesion, adaptability and endorsement of Latino cultural beliefs about familism.[8] A test for impact of parent-adolescent acculturation gaps on family conflict or adolescent adjustment problems yielded no significant findings.[25]

- Is the impact of acculturation gaps on adolescent outcomes mediated by family adjustment, such that acculturation gaps lead to family conflict, which in turn contributes to problems in adolescent adjustment?

Family conflict appears to mediate the relation between acculturation gaps and adolescent adjustment. Discrepancies in acculturation were linked to more family conflict, which was negatively related to less family bonding; less bonding was in turn related to more problem behavior for Cambodian- and Vietnamese-Americans.[26] For Asian-American college students, family conflict was a mediator so that adolescents in families with more acculturative dissonance experienced more conflict, which contributed to worse psychological adjustment.[27] For Mexican-American adolescents, family conflict and familism mediated the relations between parent-child acculturation conflicts and adolescent aggression.[28]

Parenting practices also mediate the relation between acculturation gaps and adolescent adjustment. For Chinese-American adolescents, discrepancies in heritage and American acculturation between parents and adolescents predicted fewer supportive parenting practices (inductive reasoning techniques, parental monitoring), which mediated the relations between gaps and adolescent depressive symptoms.[29] For Latino-American adolescents, acculturation gaps were associated with greater family stress and less effective parenting practices, which both mediated the relation between gaps and likelihood that adolescents use alcohol and tobacco in the future.[30]

Research Gaps

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Additional factors need to be explored that may influence the dynamics of relations among acculturation gaps, family conflict and adolescent outcomes. Conflict and poor adolescent outcomes in immigrant families may be a function, not of acculturation gaps per se, but of other contextual factors. It is plausible that well-functioning families with good communication and close relationships are able to handle acculturation gaps without disrupting family functioning. Family functioning alone is a better predictor of adolescent delinquency than acculturation gaps.[18] The gap predicted father-child conflict only in families with low father-child relationship quality.[24] So acculturation gaps may function as a stressor, but well-functioning relationships between parents and children may buffer their effects. These complexities need to be unraveled through longitudinal and qualitative research that aims to understand the dynamics of acculturation gaps in immigrant families.

Conclusions

The acculturation gap hypothesis states that, because immigrant children and their parents acculturate at different rates, acculturation gaps emerge between them. In particular, acculturation gaps are expected to occur such that parents are more acculturated to the heritage culture than their children, and children are more acculturated to the host culture than their parents. Such acculturation gaps (or acculturation dissonance) are thought to give rise to family misunderstandings and conflict, which in turn have negative impact on immigrant children. Dissonance or gaps between parents and children predict adolescent adjustment, family conflict or parenting difficulties. Furthermore, family conflict mediates the relation between acculturation dissonance or gaps and adolescent adjustment. Thus, existing research largely supports the acculturation gap hypothesis. However, a few studies report no evidence of the negative impact of the gap on family adjustment[25] or that gaps between parents and children exist in opposite directions than predicted by the theory.[11,22] Other family factors may moderate the negative impact of acculturation gaps on family and child functioning.[18,24] This suggests the need to further explore the nature and impact of acculturation gaps in the context of other extra- and intra-familial factors.

Implications for Parents, Services and Policy

The implications of this line of research are that reducing acculturation gaps between parents and children may also reduce family conflict and improve child and adolescent adjustment in immigrant families. In particular, several studies have noted the importance of gaps in heritage

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language proficiency or use for family conflict[1,6] and adolescent adjustment.[7,16] In particular, the less likely children were to be proficient or use their heritage language relative to their parents, the more negative were the outcomes for the adolescents and their families. This finding suggests the potential importance of helping immigrant children retain their heritage language. It further suggests that parents and schools should support children's heritage language development. Services designed to reduce acculturation gaps can take a variety of forms. Schools may reach out to immigrant parents to orient them to schooling in their new culture, and in this way help reduce gaps in knowledge and understanding between the generations.[31] Therapeutic family interventions designed specifically to reduce the culture gap between parents and children have been shown to be effective at reducing youth substance abuse and conduct problems.[32] Finally, policies that expect children to acquire new language skills without heritage language support may be counter-productive because they create acculturation gaps that lead to family conflict and youth maladjustment.

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