



Resilience and acculturative pathways underlying psychological well-being of immigrant youth



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ABSTRACT

Most immigrant adolescents in Western Europe seem to feel well despite social-economic-cultural disadvantage. Researchers tend to relate the well-being of these youths to immigrants' distinctive experiences associated with their background culture, i.e., relatedness. Combining insights from resilience and acculturation perspectives in light of an ecological perspective, we tested the hypothesis that communal (e.g., school) and individual resources (e.g., autonomy) that highlight mainstream culture and values of independence are also conducive to the well-being of immigrant youth, especially when these youths are high on mainstream culture adoption. A questionnaire study among immigrant and nonimmigrant vocational school students in Belgium ($N=290$) revealed that not only relatedness but also school engagement and autonomy were predictive of a high well-being of immigrant youth, particularly of those who adopted mainstream culture. Results suggest that in different cultural contexts acculturating youth rely on multiple resources to cope with social adversity and use acculturation orientations to maximize their benefit from these resources.

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Immigrant youth (and youth of immigrant origin) in Western Europe often show similar, or even higher, levels of well-being (e.g., positive emotions, self-esteem and low distress) as their native peers, notwithstanding the poorer social conditions and the pervasive anti-immigrant attitudes with which they have to cope (Dimitrova, 2011; Güngör, 2008; Sam, Vedder, Liebkind, Neto, & Virta, 2008; Van Geel & Vedder, 2010, 2011). This is interesting because low socioeconomic status and being the target of discrimination are both major risk factors for psychological health (Liebkind & Jasinskaja-Jahti, 2000; McLoyd, 1998). What may explain that ethnic minority youth are psychologically well adjusted despite adversity? To date, researchers have addressed this question by focusing mainly on the relational aspect of immigrants' family systems, such as filial duty, strict parenting and social support (Sabatier & Berry, 2008; Telzer & Fuligni, 2009; Van Geel & Vedder, 2011). Relatedness within minority family and communities secures the embeddedness, solidarity and cultural continuity needed for psychological adjustment. However, minority youth have an acculturative task of fitting in with the mainstream culture too. To this end, they need to have attributes that promote their well-being in mainstream contexts, e.g., personal autonomy. Less is known regarding the role of autonomy and extra-familial factors (e.g., school engagement) as resources that promote the well-being of immigrant youth, due to a disproportionate focus in the literature on their family relatedness; yet, these resources have been shown to foster healthy youth development (Larson, 2000).

Resilience perspective delineates multiple resources promoting psychological adjustment, thus is well-suited to examine the factors related to well-being of minority youth from a broader perspective (Masten, 2001; Ungar, 2008). Resilience

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research has rarely been attentive to cultural influences on psychological adjustment (Ungar, 2010). Hence, the present study makes three main contributions. First, we consider resilience in the context of acculturation (see also Liebenberg, Ungar, & Van de Vijver, 2012), to uncover the multiple psychological resources associated with the well-being of minority youth, also those beyond relatedness with the family. Second, we provide insight in the different ways in which these resources promote well-being in immigrant youth with different acculturation orientations. Acculturation is considered a stressful experience which requires negotiating new ways of living and new roles and identities (Berry, 1997). Acculturation orientations, or how strongly minority members are identified with and willfully participate in their cultures of origin and settlement, influence their adaptation in different life domains (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006). Bringing acculturation orientations to the equation can help understand how immigrants deliberately use the resilience resources afforded by different cultural contexts to maximize their well-being. Third, researchers suggest that the mental health of minority youth is primarily influenced by the quality of resources in their immediate social context such as family, peers, neighborhood, and school more than by distant national immigration/minority policies, especially when social and structural barriers to mix with the larger society are high (Berry et al., 2006; Birman & Simon, 2014). By contextualizing the well-being of acculturating youth with a consideration of the ways they negotiate various resources in their proximal socio-cultural environments, this study can inform culture-sensitive programs designed to enhance resilience in disadvantaged groups along multiple domains.

1. Resilience framework: multiple resources for well-being

Resilience refers to “positive adaptation in the context of significant risk or adversity” (Masten & Powell, 2003; p. 4). Hence, resilience requires (i) the presence of a risk (e.g., poverty, being stigmatized and living in a high-rate crime neighborhood) that increases the likelihood of a negative outcome, and (ii) successful adaptation in the sense of better than expected development, competence, and positive functioning (Ungar, 2008). Resilience is more a rule than an exception; most young people endure hardship and make a successful transition to adulthood (Masten, 2001). According to Masten (2001), the reason for this lies in the fundamental adaptive/protective systems that enable individuals to develop internal assets (such as autonomy) and secure external resources (such as social support) to deal effectively with the stress that is related to unfavorable life conditions. Accordingly, developmental psychologists have identified three over-arching protective resources, or pathways, of resilience (Masten, Cutuli, Herbers, & Reed, 2009): *Relational resources* (relationships with caregivers and peers), *individual characteristics* that highlight independence and autonomy (e.g., self-efficacy, self-determination), and *communal resources* (e.g., extracurricular activities or organizations and effective schools that enable disciplined effort and facilitate a sense of mastery and belonging). These resources provide pathways to resilience to individuals, regardless of race, sex, culture, and social class.

Given that most youth at-risk show resilience in the face of adversity, high psychological adjustment despite social disadvantage implies psychological resilience of immigrant youth. From a normative resilience perspective, then, some similarity between disadvantaged minority and majority youth is expected regarding the kinds of resources that are adaptive for them. Accordingly, researchers have shown that strong relatedness, in the sense of filial duty and close relationships with parents, was related to a greater well-being of *both* ethnic minority (e.g., those of Turkish and Moroccan origin) and majority students in Dutch and Belgian vocational schools –i.e., low-status schools with a high concentration of socioeconomically underprivileged students (Güngör, 2008; Van Geel & Vedder, 2010). Likewise, it can be assumed that resources that benefit the well-being of mainstream youth would also contribute to the well-being of their minority peers.

2. Culture and well-being

While there are protective factors that are universally associated with well-being in the face of adversity, immigrants' sociocultural contexts in which acculturation occurs may differ in the norms they dictate regarding appropriate ways towards well-being (Kwak, 2003). Many mainstream cultures in Western host societies (particularly middle classes) promote independence from others; people in these contexts are happy if they feel self-sufficient and can pursue autonomy. In contrast, the heritage cultures of immigrants of non-Western origin tend to emphasize interdependence among people; relatedness and respectability are more decisive for well-being (Kitayama, Karasawa, Curhan, Ryff, & Markus, 2010; Rooyackers, de Valk, & Merz, 2014; Uchida, Kitayama, Mesquita, Reyes, & Morling, 2008). By implication, the mainstream and heritage cultural contexts of acculturating youth may differ “in the availability and accessibility of facilitative resources (both internal and external) necessary for positive development under stress” (Ungar, 2010) to the extent that these resources underline independence or interdependence. Mainstream resilience research has not been sensitive to such cultural influences (but Ungar, 2008).

If cultures differ in the extent to which they offer certain protective resources, minority youth are expected to seek and engage in resources relevant to their heritage culture (i.e., relatedness) and to the mainstream culture (e.g., autonomy) to attain optimal well-being. However, resources afforded by the mainstream culture may not be readily adaptive for minority youth due to cultural differences in the pathways to well-being. For instance, while the child's conformity is valued and endorsed within rural-origin Turkish immigrant families to secure relatedness and intergenerational solidarity (Phalet & Schönplflug, 2001), the same behavior is frowned upon by mainstream teachers who typically consider conformity as a threat to autonomy (Crijnen, Bengi-Arslan, & Verhulst, 2000). Cultural mismatch such as these in key acculturation contexts interferes with the ability of minority youth to develop and benefit from qualities valued in these contexts. Accordingly, inter-

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