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We have come a long way, baby: “Explaining positive adaptation of immigrant youth across cultures”

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ABSTRACT

Immigrant youth are and will continue to be a diverse and important part of Western nations. In this context, the study of immigrant youth adaptation has burgeoned. The papers of this special section represent a shift from a deficit-based to a strength-based approach to immigrant youth. They focus on unpacking the immigrant paradox, often based on longitudinal, multilevel data. In this commentary, we discuss how the research findings and themes that emerge from these papers contribute to our understanding of the processes of development and acculturation, of the importance of individual differences and the role of context for immigrant youth adaptation. These studies show that we have come a long way ... but that we still have a long way to go.

Migration is a defining phenomenon throughout history and modern times. Millions of people, including families, with children and adolescents, are displaced or voluntarily migrate seeking a better future or fleeing war and atrocities. Even though migration is not a new phenomenon, the movement of such large numbers of people as it has been observed in the beginning of the 21st century is historically unprecedented. The integration of immigrants in host societies is in the best interest both for immigrants' well-being and for host societies' prosperity. In this context, the study of immigrant adaptation and acculturation has burgeoned. Because immigrant youth are a vital part of the economic future of host societies, their adaptation and acculturation have received the lion share of researchers' attention. Their positive adaptation is a litmus test for how well immigrants are integrated in their new home ([Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2012](#)).

Early studies took a deficit-based perspective on immigrant acculturation and adaptation. Researchers expected that the stress inherent in migration and subsequent acculturation would result in heightened mental health symptoms, difficulties in adaptation and identity confusion among immigrants ([Berry, Kim, Minde, & Mok, 1987](#)). However, recent research suggests that, particularly in what concerns children and youth, after an initial period following migration, most adapt and do well in their new environment ([Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006](#)). Thus, in the past decade, studies are now also conducted from a strengths-based perspective. They have increasingly focused on positive developmental outcomes of immigrant youth, instead of searching for the presence of mental health problems.

Most of these studies focused on developmental indices of adaptation, such as academic achievement, school engagement and conduct, as well as on indices of psychological well-being, such as self-esteem and life satisfaction. They documented a phenomenon observed particularly in the United States, called the immigrant paradox ([Garcia-Coll & Marks, 2012](#)). First generation immigrant children, contrary to what was predicted from deficit models, had more positive developmental outcomes compared to second generation children of immigrant descent and nonimmigrant descent. However, the immigrant paradox seemed to depend on the

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ethnic group, the domain of development, and the age of the immigrant child. Furthermore, the immigrant paradox found little support outside the United States. For example, a meta-analysis based on 51 studies conducted across the European continent revealed that immigrant youth, independently of generation, had significantly worse academic adjustment, externalizing and internalizing problems compared to youth of non-immigrant descent (Dimitrova, Chasiotis, & van de Vijver, 2016). It is clear that acculturation and adaptation are a function not only of the individual or of the ethnic group, but of the receiving context and the easiness of incorporation into a positive path of development.

The description of the immigrant paradox was an important first step in questioning the dominant deficit paradigms but also in documenting who adapts well and under what conditions. However, as Marks, Ejesi, and García Coll (2014) argued, explaining why some immigrant youth do better whereas others struggle and have adaptation difficulties was an imperative next step. Such step is needed, representing a more nuanced approach to ascertain simultaneously the complexity of both the individual and group processes in particular receiving contexts.

In this line, Motti-Stefanidi and colleagues (Motti-Stefanidi & Masten, 2017; Motti-Stefanidi, Berry, Chrysoschoou, Sam, & Phinney, 2012a) proposed a conceptual model integrating developmental, acculturation and social psychological approaches to the study of immigrant youth adaptation. This integrative model examines immigrant youth adaptation in developmental, acculturative and social context through the lens of a risk and resilience perspective. It addresses the question who among immigrant youth adapts well and why?

The complexity of the phenomena under investigation, leads contemporary researchers to conduct large longitudinal, multi-level studies, and to use sophisticated statistical methods. Currently an increasing number of studies, often based on a risk and resilience or a positive youth development (PYD) approach to immigrant youth adaptation, search for potential promotive and protective factors and processes using moderator-mediator models, which addresses the call for studies focusing on the mechanisms of the paradox (Marks et al., 2014). Such designs allow for an examination of inter-individual differences in intra-individual development in different domains of adaptation (e.g., Motti-Stefanidi, Asendorpf, & Masten, 2012b). They also allow us to disentangle influences on changes in adaptation due to development from those due to acculturation (e.g., Fuligni, 2001; Jugert & Titzmann, 2017).

Several of the papers contribute to unpacking the immigrant paradox, either by focusing on different domains of immigrant youth's adaptation or on different aspects of the immigrant experience. While other work in this special section proposes a statistical method which allows for partitioning the between ethnic group, within ethnic group and within person variance to explain group and individual differences in youth's adaptation.

Specifically Titzmann and Gniewosz (2017) focused on language brokering, a relatively common phenomenon in immigrant families, whereby immigrant youth assist their parents by translating and interpreting in situations such as health care visits, parent-teacher conferences and bank transactions. Child language brokers often are responsible for facilitating their family's access to services, information or material resources in the host country. Historically, this practice has been considered primarily from a deficit perspective-as an example of parentifying the child- and its potentially negative effect on the parent-child relationship.

The study, conducted in Germany, included ethnic German immigrants from the former Soviet Union. Key results are: first, that adolescents' competence in the German language predicted, beyond mothers' own German language competence, fewer socio-cultural adaptation difficulties in their mothers; second, that adolescents' parentification (referring to adolescents' level of family obligations, including language brokering) moderated the relation between adolescents' German language competence and mothers' socio-cultural adaptation difficulties. Mothers of adolescents high in parentification, compared to those low in parentification, and higher German language competence had fewer socio-cultural adaptation difficulties.

Although the study is cross-sectional, its strength lies in the use of dyadic mother-adolescent data, provided independently by mothers and their adolescent children. In addition, the data were analysed with the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model, a sophisticated statistical method which is based on a structural equation modelling framework and estimates actor and partner effects in cross-sectional data.

The study also showcases two key principles of developmental models accounting for immigrant youth adaptation (e.g., Motti-Stefanidi et al., 2012a). First, the associations in such models are assumed to be bidirectional; that is, the adaptation of youth shapes and it is shaped by the contexts of their lives, in this case the mother's German language capabilities and the demands for German fluency in their environment. Second, immigrant youth are considered active agents in their development and acculturation. The results of this study actually suggest a role reversal between immigrant parents and their children, at least with respect to issues related to parents' functioning in the host country. The question remains whether the phenomena of child language brokering and parentification are risk factors for immigrant youth adaptation and mental health. Adolescents' age may moderate this link, with younger youth being more at risk. The present study did not address this question and extant scientific evidence is contradictory.

Dimitrova, Johnson, and van de Vijver (2017) focused on a particularly interesting ethnic group, the Roma. These youth are considered an ethnic minority in the European countries where they have settled but they can also be mobile and, thus, are in some cases internal migrants. They live in a highly discriminatory context and are exposed to multiple negative group stereotypes.

The Dimitrova et al. (2017) study examined whether the expected positive link between ethnic socialization, on the one hand, and better academic achievement and life satisfaction, on the other, was mediated by youth's positive ethnic identity. They found a direct positive link between ethnic socialization and life satisfaction, but not between ethnic socialization and academic achievement. Ethnic identity mediated the relation between ethnic socialization and both outcomes.

The authors argued that a key aspect of ethnic identity in their study may be exploration (versus commitment). It should be noted that the older form of the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM; Phinney, 1992), which was used in this study, has been argued to assess more ambivalent forms of exploration (Syed et al., 2013). Several of the items refer to behaviours on the part of individuals that may or may not have led to any identity benefits, but rather could signal unsuccessful or ongoing attempts to learn more about

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