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Understanding positive immigrant youth adaptation in the context of multiculturalism[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This commentary highlights some of the strengths of the papers in this special issue focusing on how they advance acculturation research; how they link immigrant youth research with positive youth development and how they provide some insights into understanding how immigrant youth thrive in their adoptive societies. The commentary takes as its point of departure the prototypical research question for immigrant youth research within the perspective of positive youth development and the ultimate goals of acculturation research, i.e., to (i) promote positive psychological acculturation and the well-being of individuals and (ii) the attainment of harmonious intercultural relations among all groups in contact, and argues that the four papers fall short in addressing the second goal. The second goal is subsequently linked to multiculturalism and suggest that to do full justice to the prototypical research question, more attention should be directed to incorporating indicators of multiculturalism in acculturation research.

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While acculturation research is concerned with all changes that arise following a meeting between two or more cultural groups (Sam & Berry, 2010), they boil down to two fundamental goals: the “promotion of positive psychological acculturation and the well-being of individuals ... and the attainment of harmonious intercultural relations among all groups in contact, leading to a more congenial larger society for everyone involved in the process of acculturation” (p. 529). The four papers in this special issue on “*Explaining Positive Adaptation of Immigrant Youth across Cultures*” undoubtedly address the first of the two goals. First, the papers advance acculturation research in general; secondly, they link immigrant youth research with positive youth development and thirdly they provide some invaluable insights into understanding the why and the how of those instances when immigrant youth thrive in spite of precarious developmental disadvantages and unreceptive societies of settlement. Two of the papers in this issue, for instance, Syed and Juang (this issue, 2017), and Deater-Deckard, et al. (this issue, 2017) are longitudinal in nature – the kind of studies that are generally lacking in acculturation research (Berry, Sam, & Rogers, 2006), in spite of acculturation research's interest in change. The paper by Dimitrova, Johnson, van de Vijver (this issue, 2017), while not focusing on immigrants concerns a highly disenfranchised ethnic minority group, Roma, and manages to tease out factors that can readily be generalized to immigrant youth in the effort to understand their positive

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adaptation. The paper by [Titzmann and Gniewosz \(this issue, 2017\)](#) using immigrant mother-child dyads touches on an important topic of children's role in the lives of immigrant families, a major lacuna in cultural transmission research (see [Schönflug, 2009](#)). Moreover, the [Deater-Deckard et al., paper \(2017\)](#) looking at within-person and within-group changes beautifully highlights the importance of making a distinction between acculturation as a group phenomenon and as an individual phenomenon ([Sam & Berry, 2010](#)), because of the differential rates at which change occurs. Indeed, one of the very reasons for carving psychological acculturation out of the larger field of acculturation, which primarily is anthropological, is because of individual and group differences when it comes to change ([Berry, 1997](#); [Graves, 1967](#)).

The 21st century has seen immigration reaching unprecedented levels, with approximately 244 million people living in a country other than the one they were born ([United Nations, 2016](#)). One important immigrant group is the young, which has been described as constituting one of the fastest growing sectors of the population in many Western countries ([Hernandez, 2012](#)). With immigrants increasingly becoming a major source of labor in many Western countries because of falling fertility rates and aging populations ([National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2017](#)), it behooves societies to ensure that immigrant youth are well adapted and successful in their new homes ([Masten, Liebkind, & Hernandez, 2012](#)). Sadly, however, immigrant children and youth have been described to be particularly vulnerable to the adaptation problems that arise from immigration and acculturation ([Motti-Stefanidi, Berry, Chrysochoou, Sam, & Phinney, 2012](#)). From demographic and economic points of views however, the future of any society rests on the children and youth as they are the future leaders, workers and parents of the society ([Sam, 2006](#)). In order, not to waste immigrant youth's potential for making positive contributions to their adoptive societies, linking their adjustment to positive development may not only be prudent, but could yield positive outcomes for the youth themselves in terms of their overall psychological wellbeing ([Lerner, Lerner, Bowers, & Lewin-Bizan, 2012](#)).

Rather than focus on the deficiencies of youth, positive youth development (PYD) places emphasis on capitalizing on the strengths of youth and harnessing them into positive outcomes. Notwithstanding their disadvantaged backgrounds, the ultimate developmental task of immigrant youth is to manifest positive adaptation in the areas of psychological, sociocultural and intercultural adaptation ([Berry & Sam, 2016](#); [Motti-Stefanidi et al., 2012](#)). Considering the complexity of migration and the adaptation thereof, [Lerner et al. \(2012\)](#) have proposed that in linking immigrant youth adaptation to PYD, the prototypical question should be—"which features of the immigrant experience of what immigrant groups, from what countries of origin and in what new national settings, result in what levels of what indicators of achievement at what points in generational and ontogenetic time" (p. 311).

The four papers in this special issue collectively and in different ways address several of the key issues raised by Lerner and his colleagues. For instance, the paper by [Syed and Juang \(this issue, 2017\)](#) focusing on Chinese immigrants to the United States found that acculturation value patterns were unrelated to parent education, gender and nativity (i.e., generation) but were related to family cohesion, self-esteem, general and academic self-efficacy, and grade point average. The researchers also found that while acculturation behavior patterns were related to nativity, parent education, general self-efficacy and family cohesion, but were not related to gender. A natural follow-up question to the above finding is whether similar results will be obtained if the focus of the study had been on for instance, Turks in Germany. From a cross-cultural psychological perspective, the answer most likely will be, no; because the cultural context for Turks in Germany is very different from that of Chinese in the United States. Moreover, the two acculturating groups have very different historical backgrounds when it comes to their presence in the society of settlement. The issue of context and more specifically, multiculturalism forms the crux of this commentary and relates to the second goal of acculturation research that [Sam and Berry \(2016\)](#) identified.

The papers in this issue, and rightly so, all aimed at addressing the first goal, of promoting positive psychological acculturation. This is consistent with the intended goal of this special issue. However, the papers fall short of the second goal of enhancing harmonious intercultural relations among acculturating groups.

Missing in the studies reported in this issue is a detailed description of the context in which the adaptation is taking place, and more importantly specific indicators of multiculturalism. Situating the reported studies into acculturation research implicitly acknowledges societies as multicultural. However, a multicultural society entails much more than the demographic fact of people of different cultural backgrounds living together. Multiculturalism as a concept refers to "a policy and its attending practices regarding the coexistence of many ethnocultural groups in a plural society, as well as the normative beliefs that characterize how the relationships should be among the groups" ([Sam, 2017](#), p. 504). When people of different cultural backgrounds live together, it is not unusual that individuals and the groups develop ideologies and come to hold beliefs on how members of the different cultural groups should live side by side. These ideologies are what have become known as the acculturation expectations and the intercultural strategies ([Berry & Sam, 2013](#)). These ideologies may form the basis (but not necessarily) of the country's (multiculturalism) policy on the settlement of migrants ([Berry & Ward, 2016](#)). Policy and governance are two different things: A policy is simply a statement of intent, and has to be put into action (i.e., governance) in order to achieve the intended goal. The good intentions of a policy may unfortunately turn out to be unworkable ([Sam, 2017](#)). The different forms of multiculturalism (i.e., as an ideology, policy and governance) serve as constraints and opportunities an individual may have when it comes to the acculturation options that may be available to the individual, and the ultimate adaptation outcome.

Countries implement or practice their multicultural policies differently and these may result in different adaptation outcomes (see [Sam & Horenczyk, 2012](#); [Stevens & Vollebergh, 2008](#)). Three forms of multicultural governance – conservative, liberal and plural – have been identified (see [Fleras, 2011](#) for discussion). For instance, France, Canada and the Netherlands are said to respectively follow conservative, liberal and plural multicultural governance. More specifically, the Dutch approach to

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