Newly Immigrant Children and Adolescents:  
Child and Parent Adjustment in the First Post-Migration Year

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I’ll be talking today about data from the first wave of a 3-year longitudinal project funded by the Spencer Foundation. The project addresses the initial adaptation of children and adolescents to the U. S. school environment.

Interest in immigrant student adjustment is increasing exponentially, along with the high numbers of immigrant children and adolescents entering U. S. schools. According to Fuligni (1998), immigrant children will comprise 1/4 of the school population within the next 7 years.

Recent reviews (ex. Coll & Magnusson, 1998; Fuligni, 1998; Hernandez & Charney, 1998; McLoyd, 1998; Rumbaut, 1997) highlight the pressing need for data on immigrant child adaptation. The existing data focus mostly on academic adjustment in adolescents. We have very little information regarding the psychological adaptation of immigrant children and adolescents, and the findings we do have are mixed. We are, in short, playing catch-up with respect to understanding the effects of immigration on child and adolescent populations.

Immigration in Life Span Context

From a life span perspective, immigration is a profound non-normative life transition, requiring extensive adaptation. Immigration is often accompanied by many stressors, including loss of family, home, and country, along with social and economic problems. The stresses of immigration enhance the need for social support at a time when the act of migration itself is likely to disrupt the family’s support network.

Both personal characteristics and contextual factors will play a role in immigrant adaptation. Personal factors include the developmental life stage and ethnicity of the individual. Contextual factors include the socioeconomic status and receiving context of the immigrant family.

We know that there are marked variations in economic status and receiving contexts across immigrant groups of differing ethnicity. However, we know very little about life stage differences in the experience of immigration. Immigration is a process that may have multiple and diverse ramifications across generations within the family system, but we know very little about similarities or differences in the way immigration is experienced by children and adults. We have begun to explore this issue by analyzing parallel data from the children and parents (or parent figures) participating in our project.

The data I’ll be showing you today focus on the psychological adjustment of children and their parents in their first year following migration, in relation to specific types of stress accompanying the migration experience, and in relation to the amount of social support available to them.

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Research Questions

Our initial analyses address four research questions:

1. Are the stresses of immigration comparable for parents and children? That is, do children and parents experience the same amounts and types of stress?

2. Does immigration stress relate to child and parent adjustment difficulties? How do these stressors impact the psychological well-being of immigrant children and parents?

3. Does social support help? Are there direct or moderating effects of social support on adjustment?

4. Are the effects of stress and support comparable across immigrant groups differing in socioeconomic characteristics.

Sample

The sample included 638 child and adolescent elementary, middle, & high school participants in grades 3-4, 6-7, and 9 of Miami-Dade Co. Public Schools. Participants were born in Argentina, Colombia, Cuba, Haiti, or English-speaking Caribbean countries. The latter were mostly from Jamaica, but, to obtain a sufficient number of English speakers in the sample, we included children from other English-speaking nations (Bahamas, Cayman Islands, Dominica, and Trinidad & Tobago).

Participants had resided in the U. S. for less than one year at our initial data collection time. We have a sub-sample of 425 participants with both child and parent data.

We put a lot of thought into choosing the sample groups. We wanted them to differ in socioeconomic characteristics and receiving contexts, but not to be so heterogeneous that we couldn’t address cultural influence. Our original plan was to restrict the sample to Caribbean immigrants, including a sample from the Dominican Republic. However, Dominican immigration had slowed when we began the study, so we opted for the two South American groups instead. We now think this was a fortuitous decision, as there are almost no data on South American children and the findings so far with these groups are quite interesting.

Procedure

Procedurally, we conducted personal interviews with the children at school in their native languages. We also obtained teacher ratings of school adaptation. Parent surveys were taken home at the time of the interview and parents returned them by mail. We followed up with phone calls for surveys that were not returned and offered parents the option of answering by phone. (However, only 27 parents answered the survey by phone.)

Immigration Stress Measure

Our measure of immigration stress is a 26-item checklist of stressors related specifically to immigration. The list was derived from both the literature on immigration and the experiences of the many immigrant students working on the project. The present analyses included 20-items that were parallel for children and parents. Specifically, we asked participants, “Have any of these things been hard for you since you moved to the United States?”
Factor analyses of the child and parent measures yielded 5 sub-scales:

1. **Social Disruption**
   - Leaving friends
   - Leaving family members
   - Not having relatives nearby
   - Not having friends nearby

2. **Experiencing Prejudice**
   - Kids not liking you or making fun of you because you are [participant’s country]. (The parent version of this item was “Prejudice toward you because you are from your country of origin.)
   - People treating you unfairly because of your skin color.
   - Kids (people) from different countries fighting or arguing with each other.

3. **Encountering Novel Circumstances**
   - Trying to make new friends.
   - Living in the neighborhood you live in now.
   - Living in the house you live in now.
   - Meeting people who are not from [participant’s country].

4. **Experiencing Misunderstanding**
   - People not understanding the way you speak.
   - People not understanding [participant’s country] ways of doing things.
   - Teachers not understanding [participant’s country] ways of doing things.

5. **Family Problems**
   - Family members fighting or arguing with each other.
   - Family members worried about money.
   - Family members not knowing how to do things here in the U. S.
   - Family members disagreeing about how to do things here.

**Child Social Support Measure**

To assess support to the children, we use Antonucci’s Convoy Mapping Procedure adapted for child populations (Levitt, Guacci-Franco, & Levitt, 1993). We first ask children to place their closest and most important persons in a concentric circle map. Then we ask which of these persons provides each of 6 support functions. The support functions tap the affective, affirmative, and direct aid support domains specified by Kahn and Antonucci (1980) in the Social Convoy Model.

Specifically, we ask:

“Are there people you talk to about important things.
…who make you feel better when something bothers you or you are not sure of something?
…who would take care of you if you were sick?
…who like to be with you and do fun things with you?
…who help you with homework or other work you do for school? and
…who make you feel special or good about yourself?”
Parent Social Support Measure

Support to parents was assessed with four items, asking:

“How many people would help if a sick child needed to be picked up from school?”
“How many would help if your family did not have money to pay bills?”
“How many in the U.S. do you confide in?”
“How many could help you obtain needed information?”

Except for the “confide” item, these questions were adapted from the Suárez-Orozcos’ Harvard Immigration Project (in progress). Responses on the 5-point scale could range from “No One” to “6 or more”.

Child Adjustment Measures

We had four measures of children’s adjustment. These were:

The short form of the Kovacs (1985) Children’s Depression Inventory. Scores range from 1 to 3.

A psychological symptom checklist, also adopted from the Suárez-Orozcos. This 22-item checklist covers a range of symptoms related primarily to depression and anxiety.

An abbreviated 6-item version of the Harter (1985) self concept scale adapted to an interview format. Scores range from 1 to 6.

A teacher-rated scale of school adaptation, taken from Alexander, Entwhistle, & Dauber (1993). The school adaptation measure is a 14-item scale assessing Interest and Participation, Attention Span and Restlessness, and Cooperation and Compliance, with scores ranging from 1 to 6.

Parent Adjustment Measures

Parent Adjustment was assessed with two measures:

The Bradburn Affect Balance Scale, which is a widely used measure of positive and negative affect in community-based samples. Scores range from 1 to 10.

A single item Life Satisfaction index, “How satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days” (Campbell, Converse, and Rodgers, 1976). Scores range from 1 to 7.
Results

Are the stresses of immigration comparable for children and parents?

- Our findings for Year 1 suggest that the experience of immigration is different for children and their parents.

- Children reported significantly more stress than parents overall and more in each area except family problems.

- Although we are not focusing on age differences at present, I note that within the child sample, the youngest children reported the highest level of stress. These results may reflect age differences in the extent to which individuals are able to anticipate and prepare for the move.

- We had asked children whether they learned that they were moving to the U.S. before or after they came. This index was correlated modestly but significantly with the stress and adjustment measures. Children who were not informed that they were migrating experienced more stress, depression, and symptoms and lower school adaptation.
Does stress affect adjustment?

To assess the relation of immigration stress to adjustment, we created high and low stress groups by dividing the sample at the median and performing MANOVAs on the adjustment measures for children and parents.

There were main effects of stress on all of the child adjustment measures, although the effect for school adaptation was marginal. Stress did not interact with student grade level and there was no main effect of grade level in this analysis. The finding for the psychological symptoms measure is particularly striking. In fact, the correlation of stress with symptoms was .43.

Similarly, there were significant main effects of stress on parent affect and life satisfaction. Parents reporting more stress had diminished affect and life satisfaction.
Does support help?

- Support was not related to the number of stressors reported by the child, but there was some effect of support on child adjustment.

- A MANOVA yielded a main effect of support on child adjustment, which was significant for self-concept and depression, and marginal for symptoms.

- Again, there were no significant effects by grade level in this analysis.

- School adaptation was not affected by support to the child, but we found, in a separate analysis, that support to the parent contributed positively to school adaptation.

- Support to parents was related to children’s reports of fewer family problems. Support to parents was also related marginally to lower depression and fewer symptoms in children.

- Parent reports of stress were not related significantly to child outcomes. (We anticipate that there are such effects, but they are likely to be mediated by parental support to the child, and we have yet to examine that possibility).
• With respect to parental adjustment, the support effects were more pronounced.

• Parents with less support reported greater stress, lower affect, and diminished life satisfaction, compared to those with more support.

• The main effect of support on life satisfaction was marginal, but there was a significant interaction of stress and support. This is the classic buffering effect: Support doesn’t differentiate life satisfaction under low stress conditions, but when stress is high, life satisfaction is enhanced for parents if they have more support.

• Thus, in general, support was clearly helpful to parents weathering the stresses of immigration.

• Children also appear to benefit from supportive networks, although the effects are not as consistent.

• Many of the support figures named by the children still resided in the child’s country of origin, but analyses considering the location of network members do not shed much light on these findings. This may be because little time had passed since the children were separated from these persons, and they were still perceived as highly supportive, even in their absence.

• We anticipate that support will play a greater role as children continue to cope with the stresses of adaptation.
Are the effects comparable across immigrant groups?

- With regard to the total stress reported by the child-parent dyads, there were significant differences between child and parent within Argentinean, Colombian, and Haitian groups.

- Haitian children had higher stress levels than their parents, but the greatest child-parent discrepancies were in the two South American groups.

- Argentinean and Colombian children were nearly comparable to Haitian children in the numbers of stressors they reported, whereas their parents were significantly less stressed than were Haitian parents.

- Although we need to do further analyses to understand this pattern of effects, we hypothesize that the receiving context of the school may be more stressful for the South American children, compared to the employment and community context of their parents.

- As the preceding slide shows, these children are far more likely to be in schools where few of their peers are from their same countries. Although we didn’t do a slide, they are also more likely to be in schools where fewer children speak Spanish.
• We also examined inter-group variation in children and parents by types of stress.

- Children from Argentina, Colombia, and the English-speaking Caribbean reported more social disruption than their parents.

- Argentinean, Cuban, and Haitian children reported more prejudice than their parents, with the highest levels of prejudice reported by Haitian and Argentinean children and Haitian parents.
• Argentinean and Colombian children had more difficulty with novel circumstances than their parents, but Haitian children and parents had the most difficulty overall.

• Children from Argentina, Colombia, and Haiti also reported more difficulty being understood than their parents.

• Haitian parents reported more misunderstanding than did parents in other groups.
The only significant parent-child discrepancy for reports of family difficulties was in the Cuban group. Cuban children reported fewer problems than their parents.

Without further data, we can only speculate that Cuban parents have an informal reputation for being highly protective of their children, and they may insulate children from awareness of their own difficulties.

**Adjustment by Group**

- With respect to adjustment, there were almost no main or interactive effects of group in analyses of the child and parent adjustment measures.
- Thus, although there were group differences in levels of stress, the effects of stress and support appear to function comparably across the divergent immigrant groups.

**Conclusions**

We draw several tentative conclusions, based on this preliminary examination of newly immigrant children and their parents:

- First, children are generally more stressed by the immigration experience than are parents, and this is particularly true for the Argentinean and Colombian children in the sample.
- Second, stress is related negatively to psychological adjustment in both children and parents.
- Third, social support is linked to reduced stress in parents and to better adjustment in both parents and children.
- Finally, stress and support processes function comparably across immigrant groups, but there are variations in child and parent stress levels across groups. Argentinean and Colombian children, along with Haitian parents and children, experience higher levels of stress and may be at greater risk for adjustment difficulties, at least in the early stages of the adaptation process.

We look forward to continued exploration of these issues as we follow the adaptation of these participants through their third post-migration year.
References


