The Immigrant Family: Parent-Child Dilemmas and Therapy Considerations

Dr. J. Roland Fleck
Associate Professor
College of Letters and Sciences
National University
USA

Dorothy T. Fleck
South Bay Community Services
USA

Abstract

Parenting is a difficult challenge for anyone. Immigrant parents find their roles and relationships with their children change, and these children are vulnerable to a number of risk factors especially during adolescence that diminish the influence of the parents in the acculturation process. The risk factors include: Language issues including a linguistic separation between parents and children which becomes symbolic of a profound emotional separation; economic stressors in which the main reason for which many families emigrate, i.e., economic betterment, becomes the source of greatest stress; differing parenting practices including the challenge of raising their children in a new seemingly unsupportive and permissive culture; and identity development where the adolescent identity process can be stressed by the difficulties inherent in negotiating two cultures and the perception of not fitting well into the new mainstream culture. A number of suggestions for culturally-sensitive assessment and intervention are provided as well as suggestions for becoming a culturally-sensitive person and therapist.

Parenting is a difficult task for anyone. Immigrant parents face an even more difficult task with a unique set of challenges in a new and unfamiliar society. Until 1960 the vast majority of people in the United States were European Americans including 80% of the children. By the year 2000, the percentage of European American children had dropped to 61% and that percentage is expected to drop to approximately 50% by the year 2030. In fact, the projections for children in 2030 are: 26% Latin American; 16% African American; 5% Asian American; and 4% Native American, Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander (Hernandez, Denton & Macartney, 2007). In addition, it is expected that immigrant families will be spread throughout most of the United States rather than being concentrated in a few states. Currently, 20% of the children under the age of 18 (14 million children) are either immigrants themselves or the children of immigrant parents (Bornstein, Deater-Deckard & Lansford, 2007).

Parenting involves transmitting culture and values to children and many immigrant parents were well-prepared for parenting in their original culture and country. They had a well-defined sense of ethnic identity and knew how things should be in their culture of origin. However, these same parents may feel lost or at least off balance here in the United States where the differing values and expectations of this new culture may not be well understood. Immigrant parents find their roles and relationships with their children change, and their parenting ability is placed under significant stress in a number of ways in the new culture. These parents experience economic and social stress as they attempt to cope with the tasks of daily life without the familiar support system of family and friends and the comfort of their culture of origin. Such problems as unemployment, underemployment, multiple job holding, shifts in gender-based economic roles, language acquisition differences, realignment of parental authority, role reversal issues, separation of family members, influence of peer culture on children, and interfacing with social institutions are just a sampling of the potential economic and social stressors that parents may experience in the new culture (Tyyska, 2007).

Risk Factors in Acculturation

The relationship between immigrant parents and their children is vulnerable to a number of risk factors especially during adolescence that diminish the influence of these parents in the acculturation process of their children. "Acculturation is a process of cultural and psychological change in cultural groups, families, and individuals following intercultural contact (Berry, 2007, p. 69)." There tends to be disparity between immigrant parents and their children in the cultural and psychological changes that take place in the acculturation process. There are differences in both the degree to which people prefer to maintain their original heritage culture and identity and the degree to which people pursue engagement with the new dominant culture. As a result, there are four acculturation strategies that emerge: (1) *Assimilation* is a preference for interacting with the new larger culture with little interest in heritage cultural maintenance; (2) *Separation* is an emphasis on maintaining the original heritage culture and identity with little interest in interacting with the new larger dominant culture; (3) *Marginalization* exists where the preference is to neither maintain the original heritage culture nor pursue interaction with the new dominant culture; and (4) *Integration* exists when both preservation of the heritage culture and involvement with the larger dominant culture are pursued (Berry, Phinney, Sam & Vedder, 2006). This disparity in patterns of acculturation between immigrant parents and their children contribute to a number of parent-child dilemmas in the immigrant family.

Language Issues

Parents may have immigrated for economic reasons, hoping to provide a better life, materially, for their children. They may have very little expectation or desire to learn a new language and to adapt to the values and customs of the new country. Children, however, are typically eager and able to learn the language and to adopt the values and customs of their peers. Some children resist speaking the language of their parents. Under these circumstances, a linguistic separation evolves, symbolic of the more profound emotional separation which is concurrently developing between parents and children. By the time the children reach adolescence, a linguistic and emotional chasm may have evolved, greatly impacting the developmental processes of the children and the children's relationship with their parents. Children may develop a pseudo-independence from their family, an over-identification with their peers, and an attitude of defiance towards their parents.

Conversely, some children become overly responsible. They assume the role of interpreter and liaison for their family, in relationship to their school and other community agencies. During the elementary school years children may be comfortable with this role because it affords them a large measure of power in the family. Their parents and younger siblings defer to them and their identity begins to develop around this position of power. Some children remain in this parentified position into adulthood. This may cause difficulties for them when they marry and have to assume responsibilities for their spouse and children. They may feel "trapped" between allegiance to their family of origin and responsibility to their spouse and children.   Some children, on the other hand, develop a sense of entitlement in terms of "power" within the family, but attempt to abdicate their role in terms of responsibility.

Economic Stressors

Many immigrant families experience a significant disruption in the attachment process between parents and children due to the numerous stressors for all members of the family in adapting to the new cultural environment. Ironically, economic betterment, the main reason for which many families emigrate, may become the source of greatest stress. For example, both parents may have to work long hours and leave children to be cared for by members of the extended family, family friends or older siblings. In some cases, single mothers work two jobs to provide for their children. Despite working hard, many families make barely enough to provide anything more than basic necessities. By day's end, parents are physically and emotionally depleted, with little left to respond to the numerous needs of their children. Children, meanwhile, are left to survive challenges of their environment (school, for example) with minimal support. Parents, because they perceive that their children will appreciate the sacrifice they (the parents) are making in order to provide greater future economic opportunities for their children, are usually unaware of the sense of abandonment and isolation their children may be experiencing. Additionally, children often resent the fact that their parents cannot provide many of the material commodities that their school peers enjoy (name brand tennis shoes and electronic devices, for example). They may perceive themselves to be "less than" their peers because they have less materially.

This sense of being "less than" can in turn significantly contribute to social isolation in the school context. The end result is that many immigrant children (and children of immigrant parents) feel isolated both at home and at school. Unfortunately, most parents are unaware of the gradual, insidious impact these factors, among others, are having on their children's sense of attachment to them, to the extended family and to the values of the culture of origin. It is not surprising that by the time these children reach adolescence, this disruption in attachment, fueled by the sense of abandonment and isolation, is often expressing itself as depression and anger, substance use and gang involvement.

Differing Parenting Practices

Parenting, particularly of teenagers in the United States, can be a daunting task even under fairly optimal conditions. Many immigrant parents face challenges in this dimension, which they could never have imagined as they departed from their countries of origin, "to provide better opportunities for their children". Some acknowledge that the difficult economic conditions they left in their country of origin and the hazards they encountered in the journey of emigration, begin to pale in comparison to the unforeseen challenges of raising their children in this new culture, particularly as their children reach adolescence.

Probably the most obvious challenge is the loss of community and familiar cultural context, with shared values and the proverbial "village" concept of raising children. For example, immigrant parents may feel confused and unsupported by the permissive stance taken by public schools, namely at the junior high and high schools levels, in the U.S. On the one hand, children are required by law to attend school; on the other hand, children can easily leave the premises, access drugs during school hours, and join their peers in disrespectful behavior towards school staff and other adults. School staff members often perceive immigrant parents as having abdicated their parental role. The more likely explanation is that immigrant parents often feel confused, afraid and overwhelmed. Undoubtedly, school staff members also feel overwhelmed.

A related challenge for many immigrant parents is the differing understanding of what is considered acceptable practice in terms of discipline between the old and the new culture. Many immigrant parents are unaware of the unacceptability of corporal punishment in the U.S.; they are shocked and frightened when Child Welfare Services begins an investigation for charges of child abuse; they become afraid that they will lose their children either to "the system" or lose them to the "influence and culture of their peers". It becomes obvious that early intervention and prevention are essential, as well as culturally sensitive strategies that make every possible attempt to engage the whole family.

Identity Development

Erik Erikson (1963) organized life into eight stages with a developmental conflict to resolve at each stage. Adolescence is viewed by Erikson as the period of life between childhood and adulthood where an individual begins to establish a sense of personal identity as opposed to a sense of role diffusion and identity confusion. The adolescent needs to answer such questions as: "Who am I?", Where did I come from?", and What do I want to become?". Developing a coherent sense of identity assists us in organizing and giving meaning to our experiences and guides our decisions and behaviors. On the other hand, a diffuse or confused sense of identity makes us much more vulnerable to the influence of external events and forces. Grotevant (1987) conceptualized two key processes in identity formation: exploration of alternatives and commitment to choices. Berzonsky (1993) conceptualized identity formation as an internal process of developing a theory of self through an active process of interpreting one's experience and in turn generating new experiences.

The identity process becomes even more complicated for the adolescent in an immigrant family. Leaving one culture and settling in another brings into focus the contrast between their present ethnic identity and who they will become in their new culture. Ethnic identity refers to a sense of belonging to one's ethnic group or culture of origin and develops during adolescence and young adulthood (Phinney & Ong, 2007). As Grotevant (1987) and Berzonsky (1993) have postulated about the identity process, ethnic identity develops as a result of an active exploration process where one's experiences are interpreted and an attempt is made to attain a personal understanding of the meaning of one's group membership. Berry et al. (2006) in a large international study of thousands of immigrant and national youth suggested four acculturation or identity profiles:

(1) an *ethnic profile* (22.5 %) where adolescents demonstrated a strong orientation toward their own ethnic group with high ethnic identity and a heavy emphasis on a separation acculturation strategy; (2) a *national profile* (18.7 %) where adolescents demonstrated a strong orientation toward the new larger national culture with high national identity and heavy emphasis on an assimilation acculturation strategy; (3) an *integration profile* (36.4 %) where adolescents demonstrated substantial involvement in both their original ethnic and new national culture and emphasize an integration acculturation strategy; and (4) a *diffuse profile* (22.4%) where adolescents demonstrated both low ethnic identity and low national identity and heavy emphasis on a marginalization acculturation strategy.

In reporting the results of their study Berry et al. (2006) distinguished between *psychological adaptation* and *sociocultural adaptation.* Psychological adaptation was viewed as personal well-being and good mental health and sociocultural adaptation was viewed as competence in dealing with life in an intercultural setting. Youth with an integration profile had the best psychological and sociocultural adaptation and those with the diffuse profile had the most negative psychological and sociocultural adaptation. Adolescents with an ethnic profile had relatively good psychological adaptation but poor sociocultural adaptation and those with a national profile had relatively poor psychological adaptation and slightly negative sociocultural adaptation.

This adolescent identity development process can be stressed by the difficulties inherent in negotiating two cultures and the perception of not fitting well into the new mainstream culture. The immigrant family can provide the basic foundation for ethnic identity development, but can also be the source of considerable stress for the adolescent who is struggling with identity issues. Immigrant parents often lack an understanding of the complicated issues faced by their children in the new cultural context. Schwartz, Pantin, Prado, Sullivan & Szapocznik (2005) summarize the results of a number of research studies of non-immigrant adolescents indicating that adolescents who report positive relationships with their parents develop a more coherent and integrated sense of personal identity. On the other hand, adolescents who report conflicted and distant family relationships develop a more fragmented sense of personal identity. These authors also summarized results demonstrating that poor parent-adolescent communication patterns, poor family cohesion and a lack of parental warmth and involvement are closely related to adolescent delinquency, conduct problems and other negative outcomes such as substance abuse.

These researchers (Schwartz et al., 2005) attempted to replicate the above findings with a sample of 181 Hispanic immigrant adolescents and reported similar results. Both family functioning and identity development (i.e., coherence or confusion) were significant factors in the presence or absence of behavior problems in these immigrant youth. Samaniego and Gonzales (1999) found that more acculturated Hispanic youth (i.e., high national identity) are at greater risk for delinquent behavior compared to less acculturated Hispanic youth (i.e., high ethnic identity). These more acculturated youth were characterized by more family conflict, less maternal monitoring, more inconsistent discipline and more negative peer hassles including pressure to join a gang, do drugs, have sex, and more conflicts within the peer group. This study provides further support for hypotheses regarding the effects of the acculturation and identity process on adolescent family and peer relationships and how these effects contribute to an increased likelihood of negative adolescent behavior patterns.

Suggestions for Therapist Culturally-Sensitive Assessment and Intervention

1. Recognize the importance of early intervention and prevention and of making every possible attempt to engage the whole family.
2. Begin with a collaborative, strengths-based, and integrative approach to building rapport, assessment, and intervention.
3. Maintain sensitivity to the unique experience and perspective of each individual family member; maintain awareness of the systemic interactions among the family members.
4. Assess for the biopsychosocial history and context in the country of origin. Encourage the family members to educate you about their culture and country of origin.
5. Assess for reasons for emigration and expectations about life in the U.S. Encourage exploration of differences between expectations and experience.
6. Assess for emigration experience. Encourage each family member to tell their story.
7. Assess for level of acculturation. Encourage each family member to share their experience and perception and to respect the differences in experience and perception of other family members.

8. Provide opportunity for individual, family, children's group, adolescent group, parent group and multi-family group therapy. Multi-family group provides an opportunity to create a sense of community in which families, particularly the parents, can identify with other families who struggle with similar issues, support each other, and reduce their sense of isolation.
9. Provide psycho-education for parents, particularly about the issues of attachment, identity development of adolescents, communication and discipline.
10. Provide coaching and direction for families in relationship to school-related procedures and services.

Suggestions for Becoming a Culturally-Sensitive Therapist

1. Recognize that my own way of perceiving the world is not universal. Be aware of my own stereotypical thinking and how stereotypes develop.
2. Recognize the necessity of understanding my own culture and self in order to understand the culture of others. Be aware of how my own cultural background, experiences, attitudes, values and biases influence the way I perceive and experience others. I might ask myself "Is it appropriate for me to view this person any differently than I would if they were from my own ethnic or cultural group?"
3. Recognize that my initial reaction to cultural difference may be defensive, either disparaging the differing culture or implying that my culture is superior.
4. Recognize that my initial reaction to cultural difference may be to deny my own culture in order to gain acceptance from a differing culture, particularly one that I perceive to be dominant.
5. Reflect on situations/contexts in which I may have been or felt demeaned. Reflect on situations/contexts in which I may have demeaned others, perhaps inadvertently.
6. Reflect on situations/contexts in which I may have observed/experienced others using power and privilege inappropriately. Reflect on situations/contexts in which I may have used power and privilege inappropriately.
7. Listen to and respect others. Be careful not to make assumptions. Actively look for common ground.
8. Recognize and value differences with others and use them as opportunities to learn about myself and others.
9. Recognize and respect my own limitations.

References

Berry, J. W. (2007). Acculturation strategies and adaptation. In J. E. Lansford, K. Deater-Deckard & M. H. Bornstein (Eds.), *Immigrant families in contemporary society* (pp. 69-82). New York: The Guilford Press.

Berry, J. W., Phinney, J. S., Sam, D. L. & Vedder, P. (2006). Immigrant youth: Acculturation, identity and adaptation. *Applied Psychology: An International Review, 55,* 303-332.

Berzonsky, M. D. (1993). A constructivist view of identity development: People as postpositivist self-theorists. In J. Kroger (Ed.), *Discussions on ego identity* (pp. 169-203). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Bornstein, M. H., Deater-Deckard, K. & Lansford, J. E. (2007). Introduction: Immigrant families in contemporary society. In J. E. Lansford, K. Deater-Deckard & M. H. Bornstein (Eds.), *Immigrant families in contemporary society* (pp. 1-6). New York: The Guilford Press.

Erikson, E. H. (1963). *Childhood and society* (2nd ed.). New York: W. W. Norton.

Grotevant, H. D. (1987). Toward a process model of identity formation. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 2,* 203-222.

Hernandez, D. J., Denton, N. A. & Macartney, S. E. (2007). Family circumstances of children in immigrant families. In J. E. Lansford, K. Deater-Deckard & M. H. Bornstein (Eds.), *Immigrant families in contemporary society* (pp. 9-29). New York: The Guilford Press.

Phinney, J. S. & Ong, A. D. (2007). Ethnic identity development in immigrant families. In J. E. Lansford, K. Deater-Deckard & M. H. Bornstein (Eds.), *Immigrant families in contemporary society* (pp. 51-68). New York: The Guilford Press.

Samaniego, R. Y & Gonzales, N. A. Multiple mediators of the effects of acculturation status on delinquency for Mexican American adolescents. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 27* (2), 189-210.

Schwartz, S. J., Pantin, H., Prado, G., Sullivan, S. & Szapocznik, J. (2005). Family functioning, identity, and problem behavior in Hispanic immigrant early adolescents. *Journal of Early Adolescence, 25* (4), 392-420.

Tyyska, V. (2007). Immigrant families in sociology. In J. E. Lansford, K. Deater-Deckard & M. H. Bornstein (Eds.), *Immigrant families in contemporary society* (pp. 83- 99). New York: The Guilford Press.