Changing Places/Changing Faces: Immigrant Youth and Identity Development

Elham Bagheri

&

Jay M. Greenfeld, M.A.

University of Iowa
Changing Faces/Changing Places: Immigrant Youth and Identity Development

The challenges faced by immigrant youth during their identity development as it pertains to social class will be discussed. First, the focus will be on the process of acculturation including its effect on family dynamics. Then the focus will shift to emphasizing the intersection of ethnic identity development during adolescent identity development and its relationship to social class. Finally, the latter portion of the paper will discuss recommendations for mental health professionals and educators alike as to how we can optimally help immigrant youth to best cope with the acculturation process while accounting for its relationship to issues pertaining to classism.

According to the 2000 Census, 1 of every 5 children in the United States is a child of immigrants; this includes foreign born children or native born children who have at least one parent who is an immigrant. First and second generation immigrant children are the most rapidly growing segment of the American population (Landale & Oropesa, 1995). The experience of immigration can be stressful for immigrant children, which can put them at risk for mental health problems (Kopala and Esquivel, 1994).

Immigrant youth are often faced with extremely different messages from various sources including parents, friends, teachers, and the media, pertaining to what is an acceptable and desirable identity (Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind & Vedder, 2001). The desire and need to be accepted by the dominant culture while simultaneously being accepted by their family and culture of origin can be a challenging experience. Moreover, how they relate this experience with classism at school, work, and home can create the greatest challenge, especially as they endure the acculturation and identity formation process (Rumbaut, 1994).
Usually, children become acculturated to the mainstream culture at a faster rate than their parents (Das and Kemp, 1997). The gap in acculturation levels can influence the parent-child relationship by causing a gap in value systems, which can in turn cause a difference between the social class standing of the parents and the children. Immigrant parents often want to inculcate ethnic pride and awareness of their cultural heritage in their children (Das and Kemp, 1997). Conversely, children often have a desire to fit into the mainstream culture, more so than their parents (Kopala and Esquivel, 1994). For example, in many non-Western cultures, strong family ties and interdependence are valued, whereas in Western cultures, such as the United States, there is a tendency to place more value on independence and autonomy (Tang, 2001). This relates especially to social class because in a Western society which values independence, youth who are taught to value dependence and stay with their family rather than move out at the age of 18 may be considered by Western youth to be within a lower social class strata. Additionally, many Western youth may have their own car, apartment, and job at the age of 18, whereas in many immigrant families it would not be acceptable to live alone before marriage and for immigrant families it may be considered shameful and a step down on the social ladder for children to live away from their parents.

Another way differing levels of acculturation between parent and child may influence the parent-child relationship and is affected by issues of social class is through a change of roles. Because the children acculturate faster, they often learn the language and are better able to cope with day-to-day activities in the host culture than their parents. For example, if a parent becomes ill and needs to see a doctor, the child almost always may have to accompany the parent in order to be an interpreter, also called language brokering (Weisskirch, 2005). Latino adolescents have been found to view language brokering positively and it may result in greater
ethnic identity (Wesskirch, 2005). However, there are instances when children miss school and other activities in order to fulfill these types of duties for their parents (Tang, 2001). Missing activities can cause conflicts for immigrant youth, especially activities which are viewed by many youths as important to maintain their position on the social ladder, for example, attending the movies on the weekends, attending prom, or simply going to the mall.

Identity formation and acculturation are intrinsically tied and may affect the psychological adjustment of immigrant youth. As Tang (2001) notes, the same immigrant child can be viewed by classmates as someone different because of appearance, accent, or immigration status, while being viewed as an Americanized alien by his or her parents because of his or her adoption of some American behaviors. Immigrant groups may include family values into their concept of social class and when the child is steering away from family values he or she may be considered to be stepping down on the social ladder (Fulgini and Yoshikawa, 2003). For example, adopting behaviors that are at the core of adolescent identity formation in Western societies such as dating, attending activities without adult supervision, and adopting a Western manner of dress may help immigrant youth climb the social ladder at school but have the opposite affect at home.

Ethnic identity development as it relates to classism should be considered to be an important concept in understanding the psychological adjustment of immigrant youth (McLatchie, 1997). The process of ethnic identity development can include 4 possible modes; Integration, assimilation, marginalization, and separation (McLatchie, 1997).

Integration has been found to be the most beneficial mode of acculturation in that it promotes the best sociocultural and psychological adaptations (Berry Phinney, Sam, Vedder, 2006; Berry, 1997; Berry & Sam, 1997). However, it can be a difficult mode to achieve
because the ability to balance the values of both cultures and identify strongly with two cultures can be a difficult task for immigrant youth.

Assimilating may be a way for the youth to feel included into the upper social class strata of their environment, for example their school. The child may feel the only way he or she can fit into the environment of the dominant culture and desired social class is to denounce his or her ethnic identity which can lead to “ethnic self hate” (Pumariega & Rothe, 2003) potentially contributing to depression and substance abuse (Pumariega & Rothe, 2003). For instance, Costigan and Dokis (2006) found Chinese immigrant children were less well adjusted when they affiliated less with their culture of origin.

Marginalization may lead to a misplaced social class identity as the youth cannot classify where they best fit in or which values they adhere to most, quite possibly creating a sense of loneliness (Marcia, 1994). Thus, this may lead to aggression and anger towards society as a whole. Gang involvement seems to be a possibility for these youth, offering belongingness, solidarity, protection, discipline, and warmth (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Gang involvement is often considered an image of lower social class within society. Therefore, the process of marginalization which can lead to antisocial behavior can result in downward classism for immigrant youth.

Children who are older when they immigrate may choose the mode of separation due to having extremely strong ties to their culture of origin. For example, in a study of Russian immigrant youth Berger (1997) found that youth in the separation mode tend to idealize everything Russian while criticizing anything American as negative and inferior. These youth spent most of their time with Russian friends, preferred to study in bilingual programs, were slow to learn English, and dreamed about going back to Russia (Berger, 1997). For these
youths maintaining the social class of their culture of origin is considered more important even if it results in being considered to be of a lower social within the society they live. Korean and Italian immigrant youth have been found to maintain ethnic solidarity within their cultural group in order to feel connected and in order to avoid conflict at home (Macleod, 1987 & Min, 1995). These children may feel as though they are betraying their family if they acculturate to an American lifestyle and thus sacrificing a social class position or status within their environment.

Thus far, the processes of acculturation and identity formation as they relate to issues of social class have been discussed. Mental health professionals and educators should be considerate of the special needs of immigrant youth and aim to gain a better understanding of their life circumstances.

The client’s level of acculturation has an impact on the therapist-client relationship and therefore mental health professionals should be cognizant of the acculturative process as well as the acculturative mode of the immigrant youth they are working with. Not only should therapists be cognizant of the youth’s level of acculturation, but also the acculturative level of the youth’s parents. In addition, therapists should take into account how the acculturative process intersects with issues of social class and allow a safe space for the client to explore such issues which can easily be overlooked. Therapists should aim to gain a broader understanding of social class as it relates specifically to immigrant youth rather than depending solely on the limited definition of social class in most Western societies which often assumes social class to center around income and material goods.

Due to the stigma of having mental health problems among some cultures and the lack of trust for mental health professionals, along with the many barriers that exist in accessing
mental health care, immigrant parents may be more likely to accept counseling for their children within the context of school (Esquivel and Keitel, 1990). Education is considered to be an important factor in social class status within immigrant communities. School is perceived by immigrant parents as instrumental in providing their children with the needed skills to be successful in the host country (Tang, 2001). Because of the value placed on education, immigrant parents trust schools to provide the proper services to their children. School counselors can take the lead by including programmatic changes that address the unique problems of the immigrant child (Kopala, Esquivel, and Baptiste, 1994).

School counselors can perform needs assessment to determine areas the child needs help with. Important areas to assess are the individual’s communication skills, social skills, amount of external support, and decision making skills (Kopala, Esquivel, and Baptiste, 1994). It is also important to include family members in needs assessment because the family is a central component in the lives of many immigrant youth (Esquivel and Keitel, 1990). If parents are willing and able, school counselors can interview them to determine their degree of acculturation, use of language at home, attitudes towards school, and their expectations about services that are considered useful for assisting immigrant children (Tang, 2001).

It is important for school counselors to work with teachers because in many cultures the school counseling profession does not exist and teachers are the person that immigrant parents and children look to for help (Tang, 2001). In many cultures parents look to teachers as being “educational parents” whom students can trust (Igoa, 1995).

The process of immigration and its impact on mental health has been beginning to receive more attention in recent years. Specifically, the process of acculturation and ethnic identity development has been explored. Less research has focused on issues of social class and
its intersection with acculturative process within immigrant communities, specifically using a broader definition of social class and more specifically focusing on youth versus adults. The aim of this paper is to broaden the mental health and educational communities’ concept of the acculturative and identity development processes for immigrant youth by incorporating examples of how issues of social class intersect with these processes.
References


