

# Immigrant Adolescents: Opportunities and Challenges

PETER F. TITZMANN and LINDA P. JUANG

## Abstract

Immigration is a critical issue for adolescent development as migration around the world continues at an increased pace. This essay provides insights into the opportunities and challenges in this area of research, but also spotlights important work that can serve as the foundation for future investigations. Our focus is on adolescent immigrants, as a substantial share of international migrants is under the age of 20. We first address specific issues across the crucial life domains of family, peers, and school, highlighting the need for developing outcome- and domain-specific models in immigration research instead of focusing on “The Integration” of adolescent immigrants in general. We will then discuss more general challenges and future avenues in research with immigrant adolescents: the interplay of development and acculturation, discrimination, and the increasing heterogeneity of modern societies.

## INTRODUCTION

The current migration waves are unprecedented. United Nations figures show that the number of international migrants increased substantially from 173 million in 2000 to 222 million in 2010 to 244 million in 2015. These migration streams are observed on all continents, although Europe, Asia, and Northern America host the largest numbers (United Nations, 2016). Political crises, wars, ethnic or religious hostility, and widening socioeconomic differences between regions have all fueled migration. In the future, global climate change and the concomitant disasters will spark additional migration waves. The sheer numbers and the associated growing cultural diversity show both challenging and beneficial effects for receiving and sending societies. Receiving societies are, for example, not only confronted with economic challenges, such as the distribution of resources, but also with a fast growing cultural diversity that can result in interethnic tensions. Receiving societies can, however, also benefit from immigrants who fill the gaps from shrinking workforces and contribute to the community

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economically, socially, and culturally. Sending countries often face brain drains and a shrinking labor force, but they also experience opportunities through remittances and long-term repatriation. Social science research has certainly recognized the necessity to develop an understanding of migration processes and particularly of how individuals and societies can successfully cope with and benefit from these challenges. Hence, social science provides solid evidence that can help policy makers and practitioners. Nevertheless, many questions and challenges remain.

This essay provides insights into these opportunities and challenges and spotlights important work that can serve as the foundation for future research. Although migration occurs in nearly all age groups (United Nations, 2016), we focus primarily on adolescence covering the ages of 10 to 18. Adolescence is chosen because about 15% of all international migrants are under the age of 20. In this life period, immigrating individuals have the double burden of coping with acculturation-related (language, new school system, etc.) and normative age-related challenges (Motti-Stefanidi, Berry, Chryssochoou, Sam, & Phinney, 2012). This essay first addresses specific challenges and opportunities for adolescent immigrants across crucial life domains, highlighting the need for developing outcome- and domain-specific explanatory acculturation models instead of focusing on “The Integration” of adolescent immigrants in general. We then describe more general, domain-unspecific, challenges and future avenues in research with immigrant adolescents.

### ADOLESCENT IMMIGRANTS: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES ACROSS IMPORTANT DOMAINS OF LIFE

Like all adolescents, immigrant adolescents undergo a set of normative developmental changes. Biological and hormonal changes during puberty are observed in the development of primary and secondary sexual characteristics and sexual maturation. Neuropsychological changes are observed in the brain: The share of gray matter (mainly consisting of cell bodies and axons with only little myelination) decreases, whereas the share of white matter (e.g., long myelinated axons) increases. Adolescents develop more sophisticated cognitive abilities, better working memory, and improved problem-solving abilities. In addition, changes in the socio-emotional system promote increased reward-seeking, which can lead to higher risk-taking behavior. This process is slowed down later in adolescence by changes in the brain’s cognitive control system associated with better self-regulation (Steinberg, 2015).

In the social realm, relationships with peers and parents change. Peer relations become more complex and involve various layers of relationships

(best friends, friendship cliques, crowds, romantic relationships) that differ in mutuality and function. The quality of friendships changes from joint (play) activities to mutual exchange, intimacy, and mutual support. In the family, autonomy and attachment are renegotiated between parents and children, leaving adolescents with more freedom, more responsibilities, possibly more restrictions, while securing ongoing family support. These normative developmental changes co-occur in immigrant adolescents' lives with acculturation-related tasks, such as the acquisition of a new language, familiarization with new social and cultural norms of behavior, and coping with acculturation-related stressors and issues related to their minority status. Both developmental and acculturation-related tasks each uniquely contribute to immigrant adolescents' psychosocial functioning, depending on the life domain studied.

#### FAMILY DOMAIN: ACCULTURATIVE GAP AND FAMILY OBLIGATIONS

Most young people immigrate together with their parents and siblings, making the acculturation process in the new country a family affair. However, not all family members adapt at the same rate. On average, younger immigrants adapt more easily and quickly to new conditions. This is partly due to younger immigrants' integration into educational institutions, socializing them culturally and offering contacts with local peers and teachers. This difference between parents' and adolescents' adaptation is termed *acculturation gap* or *acculturative dissonance*. Acculturation gaps can be accompanied by family conflicts or alienation between parents and children (Juang, Syed, & Takagi, 2007; Titzmann & Sonnenberg, 2016). Such gaps may be a basis for adolescents' taking on more family obligations than is the norm given their age. These obligations include tasks of language and culture brokering, but also a higher burden of acculturation-unrelated tasks, such as providing emotional (comforting parents, mediation in family disputes) or instrumental (help in decisions and in everyday life) support to their parents (Titzmann, 2012). Overall, the findings show that young immigrants often form the bridge between the host society and their family, consequently affecting adolescent-parent relationships. There are, however, still many questions to be answered: Although adolescents may adjust more quickly than their parents, this is not necessarily always the case. Acculturation gaps can also be found in opposite direction, with parents having a higher orientation to the majority culture than their kids. It is not yet clear when, under what circumstances, and in which aspects of everyday family life acculturation gaps develop, increase, decrease, or are opposite to what one expects. More research is also needed with regard to the interplay of acculturative gaps, acculturation-related family obligations

(e.g., language brokering), and acculturation-unrelated family obligations (e.g., instrumental and emotional support).

Empirically, the consequences of acculturation gaps and associated family obligations are also unclear. Some studies found beneficial effects of family obligations (Juang & Cookston, 2009), whereas other studies point to elevated stress levels and, hence, see it as a risk factor (Kim, Hou, & Gonzalez, 2016). These mixed results suggest that there are underlying moderators for the effects of family obligations on the psychosocial functioning of adolescents. Fuligni and Telzer (2013), for example, show that family obligations are associated with less detrimental effects in adolescent immigrants if adolescents see these obligations as filial role fulfillment. Other moderators associated with more detrimental effects of family obligations were younger age (Schulz, Titzmann, & Michel, 2013) and low levels of resilience (Kim *et al.*, 2016). But the search for the most decisive moderators has just begun and will be important information for developing targeted and effective prevention and intervention efforts.

#### PEER DOMAIN: FRIENDSHIP HOMOPHILY

Research on peer relations of immigrant adolescents has a long tradition, and many studies address the major question of how positive intergroup relations can be achieved. This question is even more pressing in recent decades as societies become increasingly multicultural. A major obstacle in this regard is the phenomenon of homophily. Homophily “is the principle that contact between similar people occurs at a higher rate than among dissimilar people” (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001, p. 416). Ethnicity is one of the major characteristics in which friends are similar. The preference for peers with similar ethnic or religious backgrounds can already be found in preadolescence and remains high during adolescence. About 75% of friends of Black adolescents are also black, 55% of friends of Hispanic adolescents have a Hispanic background, and about 40% of friends of Asian heritage adolescents shared their Asian background, but with 85%, the share of intra-ethnic friends was highest in the White majority (Harris & Cavanagh, 2008).

Ethnic homophily is not the desired state in multicultural societies, however. Inter-ethnic contact and cooperation results in various beneficial effects including reduced intergroup prejudice (for a recent meta-analysis on the effects of intergroup contact see Lemmer & Wagner, 2015). Inter-ethnic cooperation, thus, is a promising future research avenue. Research has already studied and replicated factors that lead to lower levels of homophily. Among them are positive contact opportunities, positive attitudes toward interethnic friendships, lower levels of discrimination, and the improvement of interethnic communication—for example by immigrants’ acquiring the

new language (Titzmann, 2014). Nevertheless, the unique contribution of each of these factors, the best way for their acquisition, potential side effects, and their interaction with one another still require more research as well as the large-scale application of these findings in practical terms.

However, low levels of homophily should not always be the ultimate goal of psychological research and intervention. In a negative racial or interethnic climate, homophily can fulfill important psychological needs for social support among ethnic minorities (van Laar, Levin, & Sidanius, 2008). In addition, if interethnic contact takes place too early after immigration, it can overburden adolescents' coping abilities. In a study on ethnic German immigrants, for example, interethnic contact was associated with more depressive symptoms among newcomers (<1.5 years in Germany), whereas it was associated with fewer depressive symptoms later on (Silbereisen & Schmitt-Rodermund, 2000). Hence, future research should address beneficial effects of both interethnic and intra-ethnic contact, combine both these research agendas, and study the effects as a function of time in the new country.

#### SCHOOL DOMAIN: ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT GAPS

Doing well in school is one of the key indicators of positive sociocultural adaptation and a path to successful integration. However, disparities in academic outcomes between students with and without an immigrant background persist, in Germany as well as in other countries. Immigrant groups are often less likely to complete higher education than majority adolescents, depending on the particular group, however. The most common explanation for the academic discrepancy between those of immigrant versus non-migrant background includes the confounding of socioeconomic status (SES) with immigration status (Kristen & Granato, 2007). Living in lower SES communities means that the schools are more likely to be under-resourced, and the neighborhoods more likely to be less safe and environmentally healthy—factors that may negatively impact adolescent health, well-being, and, ultimately, learning. Other studies show that SES cannot explain away all differences in academic achievement between immigrant and majority adolescents and offer additional explanations. These explanations include a lower language proficiency and a lower likelihood to attend preschool among children of migrant background. Educational disparities are also due to discrimination and stereotyping in school. Stereotype threat can lead to lower well-being and biological stress responses, including changes in stress hormones and sleep patterns, which, in turn, impede cognitive functioning and academic performance (Levy, Heissel, Richeson, & Adam, 2016). To put it simply: Students who do not feel well, tend not to do well.

It is a major research agenda to level out such educational discrepancies. Studies regarding generational status may be one starting point for such endeavors. Evidence on the “immigrant paradox” reveals that immigration is not always a disadvantage for schooling. First-generation (immigrant) adolescents in the United States compared to their second- and later generation age-mates often do better in terms of school grades and report higher school motivation (Marks, Ejesi, & García Coll, 2014). The mechanisms behind the immigrant paradox may help in improving the school performance of immigrants, and hence should be studied in greater detail. A second starting point is the recognition and realization of immigrant youth’s potential. Young immigrants have strengths and resources (e.g., group-specific history, another language) that need to be recognized in culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010). This recognition is necessary to ensure that immigrant adolescents have sufficient chances to do well in school, setting the stage for positive development as adults. School-based relationships, such as having a supportive relationship with a teacher or other caring adult, predict greater academic engagement and achievement (Suárez-Orozco, Pimentel, & Martin, 2009). These are all research avenues that, if followed continually, will help in overcoming educational disparities.

#### INTERPLAY OF FAMILY, PEERS, AND SCHOOL DOMAINS

The three domains highlight how immigrant adolescents cope with particular challenges in each of these domains. What is still lacking is more research on the interplay of these domains. This neglect poses a specific challenge in drawing conclusions from research that considers domains in isolation. For the majority adolescents, behavioral norms and values as well as reinforcements and sanctions are often in alignment across contexts, because teachers, parents, and often also peers share similar cultural values. For immigrant adolescents, this is not necessarily the case, because parents and teachers may have a different understanding of culturally appropriate behavior or parental involvement in school matters (Crosnoe & Ansari, 2015).

Potential consequences are manifold, reaching from communication problems between families and school to contrary expectations adolescents face across domains. For example, in the United States, Asian-heritage adolescents’ academic achievements (beneficial in the school domain) may result in higher levels of bullying by peers (detrimental in the peer domain) if their peers perceive that teachers favor Asian-heritage students at the expense of other groups (Qin, Way, & Mukherjee, 2008). The example shows that intersections of life domains have to be studied more thoroughly and that research should consider side effects (both positive and negative) of adaptation in one life domain for another. Such findings are highly relevant for intervention

studies. In addition, research should investigate in greater detail how adolescents successfully bridge life domains that are not in alignment with one another. The development of a bicultural identity and situation-based cultural code-switching are promising first steps in this direction.

## FUTURE CHALLENGES IN IMMIGRATION RESEARCH

This third section deals with general challenges of current immigration research that are related to the interplay of development and acculturation, the different forms of discrimination, and the growing diversity in modern Western societies. These challenges are not specific for a particular life domain or developmental context, but they can—if ignored—be a threat to social and societal cohesion in receiving societies.

### DEVELOPMENT AND ACCULTURATION

One of the growing tasks in research on immigrant adolescents is the differentiation between developmental and acculturative processes (Motti-Stefanidi *et al.*, 2012), and certainly more knowledge about the interplay of these processes is necessary. Past research has often ignored this differentiation and either used a developmental or an acculturation perspective to study immigrants' outcomes. However, studying immigrant adolescents from solely one of these perspectives can carry a substantial risk for misinterpretation. An overemphasis on general acculturation-unrelated developmental models ignores the immigrant-specific needs and situations, whereas an overemphasis on acculturation-specific aspects can add to the perception of a large cultural distance between ethnic groups in multicultural societies, although these groups may, in fact, be more similar than different.

Only recently have studies combined developmental and acculturation theories, but these efforts have to be intensified. It is important to learn whether adolescent immigrants are first and foremost adolescents with the same mechanisms explaining their psychosocial functioning as those found for native adolescents (Jugert & Titzmann, 2017). This would allow the application of established universal prevention or intervention programs to diverse populations. If, however, ethnicity-specific models are found to better explain the functioning of immigrants, the application of universal interventions may produce less optimal results in those groups and may increase ethnic gaps in adaptation. Under these circumstances, new prevention and intervention measures become necessary to address group-specific needs and mechanisms. Furthermore, the interplay of both processes has to be investigated. Acculturative and developmental processes may be cumulative, for example, when acculturative and developmental stressors

accumulate and impede adolescents' coping processes. But both processes may also be compensatory, for example, when language brokering leads to adolescents' increased autonomy from parents, which is normatively achieved much later and through other means in the majority population. In addition, future research may also concentrate more on the opportunities of normative biographical transitions in the life of adolescent immigrants, such as attending new educational institutions or graduation. Biographical transitions provide new social roles and expose individuals to new ecological settings. Transitions, hence, are opportunities for implementing societal guidance and interventions for helping to change individuals' established behavioral patterns and to channel them into long-term positive adaptation. The transition into a new country or the biographical transition within countries may also be accompanied by desistance from problematic deviant behaviors and offer corrections for undesirable developmental trajectories.

#### THE DIFFERENT FACES OF DISCRIMINATION AND PREJUDICE

Although the negative effects of discrimination are well documented with cross-sectional, experimental, and longitudinal studies (Umaña-Taylor, 2016), further research is needed. One line in this direction should investigate protective factors against the negative effects of discrimination. So far, research using the risk and resilience perspective has identified some protective factors, such as a positive and well-developed ethnic identity, positive relationships with parents, peers, and teachers, as well as a positive school climate. The research in this area is, however, rather scattered. Some factors are protective in one study with a particular minority groups, but it does not have the same protective effect in another study with another group. Hence, the buffering of protective factors seems to depend on circumstances or other moderators that have to be identified in the future research.

In addition, studies need to address how the level of discrimination in the majority population can be reduced in the first place. In this regard, it seems promising to learn more about different discriminating acts. In general, discrimination is being treated differently and negatively on the basis of the ethnic, cultural, or religious background. In most cases, people think of discrimination as a blatant derogative form of aggression, such as the message "Go back to your own country!" directed towards an immigrant. However, discrimination can also be rather subtle through micro-aggressions (Sue *et al.*, 2007). The seemingly harmless question "Where do you come from?", repeatedly directed toward a second-generation immigrant, conveys, for example, that this person is not really part of the majority population. Such a question, unlike a blatant devaluation, may not be meant to be offensive, but may have similar negative consequences. Challenges with this type of discrimination



are that they may be unintentional so that perpetrators have no notion of doing wrong and may even perceive the victim as oversensitive when they are confronted with their own behavior. In turn, this puts a challenge for victims' reactions to those incidents, which may hinder the successful societal abolishment of such behaviors. Hence, the study of micro-aggressions deserves more attention in the future. Such research may investigate how parents and teachers can socialize children to be attentive to verbal and non-verbal nuances in communication, and may identify effective protective factors among immigrants.

#### GROWING DIVERSITY AND CHALLENGES FOR ACCULTURATION MODELS

Another area for future research is the growing diversity in many Western societies with hosting culturally and historically diverse ethnic groups in one place. Acculturation research that only focuses on two groups, the immigrant groups and the—assumed—culturally homogeneous majority, may reach its limits in such super-diverse contexts. It can be assumed that two groups in contact differ in their interactions as compared to ten or more groups with potential alliances and complex social hierarchies, which is the reality on many Western schoolyards nowadays. For the study of immigrant groups, the growing diversity has various consequences. First of all, more comparative research is needed to identify similarities and dissimilarities between ethnic groups. Such comparisons may not necessarily define groups based on nationalities, because it is impossible to study each phenomenon in every single group across different receiving countries. Instead, different types of immigrants may be the focus of research. Such a differentiation could focus on refugees, ethnic minority groups, and sojourners, the “classic” groups in the study of immigration, but may also include other types of immigrants. More recently, for example, ethnic diaspora immigrants and repatriates have increased in numbers. Diaspora migrants return to their country of origin after living in a diaspora for longer periods—sometimes even generations. Furthermore, changes in transportation and telecommunication developments lead to a new class of immigrants who remain in close connection with the homeland while successfully adjusting in the host nation—so-called transnational groups. Transnational groups continuously move back and forth between countries creating a strong cultural and economic exchange. Inclusion of these groups in comparative studies can broaden our understanding of immigration processes, and are a step toward moving away from the overly simplistic notion that migration happens only one way and to only one destination.

In addition to differentiating types of immigrants, the identification of higher order dimensions on which host societies and acculturating groups

differ seems a way forward to understand the complexity of acculturation processes. These dimensions could be derived from cultural (e.g., collectivism vs individualism, level of familism), economic (e.g., gross domestic product), or political differences (e.g., differences in immigration policies) between sending and/or receiving countries. Large-scale comparative studies would be required in the first place to reliably identify such underlying macro-level dimensions, but in the long run they would help making predictions about groups and contexts that are not yet studied.

The growing diversity will also have consequences for theoretical acculturation models and intervention research. One of the most influential theoretical models, by Berry (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006), for example, may be challenged by increasingly heterogeneous societies. Future models may, hence, emphasize situational aspects of acculturation more (Noels & Clément, 2015) and may acknowledge the fact that globalization, mass communication, and international exchange may instigate new acculturation processes—without any direct contact between cultural or ethnic groups (Ferguson & Bornstein, 2012). The idea of stable fundamental cultural values may be questioned. Instead, individuals in multicultural societies may combine elements of different cultures more flexibly—depending on their peers, the particular situation, or personal feelings. Such polycultural individuals may activate and use different cultural responses and scripts—just like using the best fitting phone app (Morris, Chiu, & Liu, 2015). In intervention research, the societal heterogeneity may also have an impact on the strategies for improving intergroup relations. Future approaches may be less based on mutual cultural and historical knowledge about other cultures, because educational systems may not be able to convey all cultures and histories in sufficient detail. Instead, more general approaches on valuing diversity and cultural heterogeneity may move into the focus of attention in such programs.

## CONCLUSION

Immigration continues to be a critical issue for adolescent development as migration around the world continues at an increased pace. Research needs to continuously address the challenges and opportunities related to these migration streams because of the growing numbers of affected individuals and the societal needs to successfully integrate these immigrants. This essay showed the need to deepen our knowledge in this area, because adaptation processes are not yet well understood in its full complexity. Particularly needed is the consideration of immigrant adolescents' adaptation across various life domains (e.g., family, peer, and school domains) rather than the isolated study of single domains. Starting

points are the disentangling of acculturation and development, research on risk and resilience factors—particularly in dealing with different forms of discrimination—and studying the effects of growing diversity. In addition, new forms of adaptation have to be considered to better understand immigration as dynamic (as illustrated by transnational immigrants) and within the context of new technologies, forms of mass communication, and mobility opportunities. These new developments are best studied if research moves beyond a deficit-oriented approach to one that sees immigrant adolescents as potentially healthy, competent, and flourishing. In the current global climate, immigration, diversity, intergroup contact, and intergroup relationships are ever more pressing issues to understand and address.

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#### PETER TITZMANN SHORT BIOGRAPHY

**Peter F. Titzmann**, PhD, is a Professor of Developmental Psychology at the Leibniz Universität Hannover, Germany. During his academic career, he worked at the University of York, UK, the Friedrich-Schiller University Jena, Germany, the University of Zurich, Switzerland, and the University of Education Weingarten, Germany. His general research interests relate to the interplay between normative development and migration-related adaptation among adolescents with immigrant backgrounds. He has investigated this interplay in various developmental outcomes, such as experiences of stress, delinquent behavior, friendships, autonomy development, self-efficacy, and changes in family hierarchy and family interaction. His work has been published in numerous book sections and journal articles, for example, in *Child Development*, *Developmental Psychology*, the *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, and the *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*.

#### LINDA JUANG SHORT BIOGRAPHY

**Linda P. Juang**, PhD, is a Professor of Inclusive Education at the University of Potsdam, Germany. Before moving to Germany, she taught at San Francisco State University and the University of California in Santa Barbara. Her

research focuses on immigration-related issues such as acculturation, family relations, racial/ethnic discrimination, and parental racial socialization among ethnic minority adolescents and emerging adults. She is currently an Assistant Editor for the *Journal of Adolescence* and Associate Editor for *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*.

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