

Young Immigrants

A Psychosocial Development Perspective

Glen Milstein and Luka Lucić

Young immigrants are caught between parents who communicate the enculturative message of their homeland, and teachers who communicate the acculturative message of the receiving society.

We reside in New York City, which is currently experiencing a wave of immigration not seen since the beginning of the last century. According to the 2000 Census, 36% of New York City's population is foreign born (Buckner 2003; Kinetz 2002). This percentage is even higher in some parts of the city. For example, 46% of Queens, one of New York's five boroughs, is foreign born, and 56% speaks English less than "very well" (U.S. Census Bureau 2004). In New York City schools, 48% of all students come from immigrant-headed households (Landale and Oropesa 1995). The pattern of immigration is similar across the nation. Currently the population of the United States includes 32.5 million people who are foreign born, representing 11.5% of the population (Schmidley 2003). One in five of all school age children in the United States are immigrants (Hernandez 1999), and these numbers are likely to increase in the near future.

Teachers and parents do not always share the same values and views about priorities for children's education. The potential grounds for conflict include disciplinary rules, gender roles, racial stereotypes, work habits, and occupational choices; all of which can be exacerbated by cross-cultural misunderstanding and miscommunication. It is therefore essential to address the questions which arise from the increasing cultural diversity in our public schools, brought about through immigration (Phinney et al. 2001).

Readers are invited to download a study guide for this article at www.great-ideas.org/Milstein.htm.



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One way to understand these conflicts is as a disruption engendered by the disparate developmental processes of enculturation and acculturation. Enculturation describes the process whereby we acquire the values, norms, and skills that enable us to function within our own cultural groups (Ho 1995). Each culture is unique, specific, and adapted to function within its own community, which results in differences of customs, communal organizations, educational systems, and the distribution of economic resources. Enculturation is mediated through interaction with one's significant relations, whom Erik Erikson calls "counterplayers" (e.g., parents, family, teachers, friends, progeny) (Erikson and Erikson 1997, 48-49). Acculturation, in contrast, refers to the process of acquiring the values and behaviors appropriate to a new culture (Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits 1936, 149).

Migration and relocation disrupt the developmental processes being engendered from within one's own culture, as the immigrant necessarily acculturates to the usually very different mores of the receiving society. Upon entering the public school system, the immigrant child becomes exposed to a whole new set of cultural rules, roles, norms, and demands that represent the acculturative messages of the receiving society. When young immigrants' processes of enculturation and acculturation are neither in concert nor complementary—but rather clash with each other—there is a potential that this conflict will hinder the development of immigrant children.

We became interested in the psychology of immigration—particularly in the adaptation and adjustment of immigrants within the context of their host society—because of the community where we live and work. Students at our school, The City College of The City University of New York (CCNY), come from 147 countries and speak 91 different languages (Silverman 2004). Enveloped in such a diverse environment and surrounded by many personal tales of immigrant experience, we became aware of the wide array of outcomes that follow the immigration process. Some immigrants adjusted relatively easily, while others struggled to learn rules, roles, and norms as they internalized the moral and social rules of conduct that governed their new society.

Through common themes that we heard from CCNY students, we became interested in the interplay of personal and social forces, which can lead to a relatively easy adjustment for some immigrants, but cause enormous hurdles and impediments for others. Using the stage theory of Erik Erikson as a conceptual framework to guide our efforts, we chose to examine how the disruptions of migration might interfere with the psychosocial development of migrants to the United States. We asked which developmental stages are more vulnerable to these disruptions than others.

Erikson's Contributions

Erik Erikson was a student of Sigmund and Anna Freud. He developed his theory of psychosocial development by extending the Freudian theory of psychosexual development with its emphasis on the internal processes of libidinalization of primary body zones to include the corresponding ego modes as well as environmental and interpersonal influences, resulting in his theory of psychosocial development (Crain 2000). Erikson's theory follows an epigenetic principle that states that "anything that grows has a ground plan, and that out of this ground plan the parts arise, each part having its time of special ascendancy, until all parts have arisen to form a functioning whole." (Erikson 1968, 52).

Across our lifespan we ascend through eight stages of psychosocial development, one invariably following another. Within each stage we encounter a novel and unique developmental crisis or task. The outcomes of the eight crises result in strengths and deficits, which in turn influence subsequent development. The stages themselves, according to Erikson, are universal, but each culture organizes the experience of its members. Therefore, the development of the individual is a function of psychological maturation through social interactions. These interactions involve an expanding radius of influential counterplayers. It begins with the maternal person and at each successive stage expands to include a new segment of society, which the maturing person encounters while moving from one stage to the next. At each stage, the circle includes the persons or groups of people who can provide the necessary interactions

for the successful resolution of each specific developmental crisis/task.

Birth to 6 Years:

Infancy, Early Childhood, and Play Age

In the first three stages of psychosocial development, from birth to age six (Evans 1967), the growing child is passing through the developmental crises of *Trust vs. Mistrust*; *Autonomy vs. Shame, Doubt*; *Initiative vs. Guilt*. The most significant relationships in a young child's world are those within the nuclear family, beginning with the maternal and parental persons and then the basic family. Parents at this time assume a primary role within the child's social life and become a platform from which all subsequent relationships will have an opportunity to emerge. Even in the first stage of life, that of *Trust vs. Mistrust*, the society of the parents matters. Erikson says parents create a sense of trust in their children by a kind of "administration which in its quality combines sensitive care of the baby's individual needs and a firm sense of personal trustworthiness within the trusted framework of their community's lifestyle" (Erikson 1968). In these early stages it is the child's family that provides cultural guidance for social functioning within their shared community.

Age 6 to 12: School Age

During the stage of *Industry vs. Inferiority*, the radius of counterplayers expands to include not only the basic family but also same age playmates—as well as adults outside the family—from their neighborhood and school. Immigrant children might become integrated within the social context of this particular age group because children at this age are open to interdependent functioning. As Erikson (1963, 245) notes,

On the whole, it can be said that American schools successfully meet the challenge of training children of play-school age and of elementary grades in a spirit of self-reliance and enterprise. Children of these ages seem remarkably free of prejudice and apprehension, preoccupied as they still are with growing and learning and with the new pleasures of association outside their families. (p. 245)

At the same time, there is the potential for feelings of inferiority. Erikson warns about the societal prejudices that, if rooted deeply in the structure of the society, can create a hostile environment for children of these ages, both immigrant and non-immigrant alike. He points out that there is "the danger threatening individual and society where the schoolchild begins to feel that the color of his skin, the background of his parents, or the fashion of his clothes rather than his wish and his will to learn will decide his worth as an apprentice" (Erikson 1963, 260).

Adolescence

During the stage of *Identity vs. Identity Confusion*, the task of adolescence is to integrate the identifications and skills from early childhood with growing expectations of what the future may hold and what the adolescent wants to be and become. From successful integration and incorporation of the future expectations into one's scheme of self, an adolescent will acquire the basic sense of identity. Although the child needs to receive behavioral and emotional guidance, the adolescent instead seeks out models of behavior to contemplate as possible choices for self-identification. The availability and type of models the adolescent encounters can influence whether this stage is resolved through formation of an independent identity or results in identity confusion.

The majority of role models necessary for the development of identity are found within the radius of social interactions, which in early adolescence primarily includes peer groups and out-groups. Adolescents are eager to be affirmed by rituals through the relations within peer groups and to separate via the negative identity of the out-group. Erikson (1968, 132) warns that at this stage "young people can become remarkably clannish, and cruel in their exclusion of all those who are 'different', in skin color or cultural background, in taste and gifts, and often in entirely petty aspects of dress and gesture arbitrarily selected as the sign of an in-group or out-group." Later, as the next stage of young adulthood encroaches, the adolescent looks for adult models of leadership to emulate (e.g., relatives, coaches, clergy).

Our Study

At what developmental stage, if any, might young immigrants experience the greatest difficulties? In order to gain information about this question, we conducted a preliminary study in the introductory psychology classes at CCNY. We asked 179 foreign-born college students to fill out surveys that asked at what age they migrated to the United States. They then answered questions from three scales designed to measure their current sense of self-esteem, personal anxiety and social anxiety.

We had reason to believe that the children and their parents could have experienced difficulties during any of the three age groups we described above. The children who came to the U.S. prior to the age of six—during the stages when they were more exclusively dependent on their parents—might have more acutely experienced their parents' difficulties with adjusting to a new society. Those students who migrated during the latency stage, from ages 6 to 12, might have had fewer problems. According to traditional Freudian theory, the children are in the latency stage, a period of relative stability (Freud 1949). Still, Erikson notes that children of this stage can experience the pains of inferiority with respect to learning and the adjustment to school society. Adolescence would also seem to be a time of particular difficulty for immigrant youngsters because they are undergoing a quest for models to emulate in the formation of their psychosocial identity.

Although we are still in the process of analyzing our data, preliminary inspection of the results indicates a clear pattern. Somewhat to our surprise, the college students' data indicate that, in terms of current levels of anxiety and self-esteem, those who had migrated to the U.S. between six and twelve—during the School Age stage—had worse outcomes. The results prompted us to revisit the literature on that stage.

Immigrant School Age Children And their Counterplayers

From ages 6 to 12, children enter and pass through the School Age stage and seek to resolve the crisis/task of *Industry vs Inferiority*. This stage requires that the child learn to use the technological tools necessary to advance within a particular society at that particular moment in history (e.g., swords in the 1st

Century, computers in the 21st Century). In addition to learning the technical skills of tool use (including literacy and other academic skills), children learn new rules and expectations for social competence and collaboration. The potential problem of a lack of mastery leading to a sense of inferiority is real.

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The role of counterplayers is also very important. Both parents and teachers—who are typically in the Adulthood Stage of *Generativity vs. Stagnation*—have a developmental task of transmitting the social rules of culture (Erikson 1964; Huxley 1964; Fromm 1992). From whom will the children learn societal rules? Which culture's rules will be taught? The answers to these questions may underlie the emotional complexities of School Age stage for immigrant children.

Upon entering school the child enters a time of rapid developmental transformation. The social learning environment changes as the radius of significant counterplayers has its greatest expansion. Whereas the years of early childhood development were mediated by parents and extended family in the context of the home and with an emphasis on learning through play, now the insular home is supplemented by learning at school. The child now becomes an interactive member of the larger society, which accentuates structured education that is constrained by societal norms. The parents, who until yesterday occupied the dominant role in educating the child and were the main connection to larger social currents, must now *share* this role, and gradually be superseded by school teachers and school chums as the primary counterplayers during most of the child's day. The parent needs to feel comfortable that the development that began at home will continue through the teacher and in the school environment. While this would be a large and complex change for

any family, the results of our study suggest that handing over the child to the school may be particularly fraught with confusion and conflict for immigrant parents and their children.

It may be that those immigrants who arrive during the years of early childhood have a relatively easy time during the transition because they are, at the time, interacting mainly with their parents who are communicating only the enculturative messages of their homeland to them. However, school-age immigrant children may have a more difficult time because their need to learn from adult counterplayers introduces potential conflicting cultural influences. On one side are the parents communicating the enculturative message of their homeland, and on the other is the teacher who is communicating the acculturative message of the receiving society.

Another aspect of the conflict created by the separation of School Age children from their parents is that even 6, 7, and 8-year-olds are often the parents' essential helpers. Because the kids typically speak English so much better than the parents, the parents depend on them enormously. The parents feel helpless when the children aren't home, and the children feel very guilty leaving the parents so helpless and alone. This helplessness may be worsened by the parents' recognition that, due to deficits of language and cultural fluency, they are unable to fulfill their adult counterplayer role.

In contrast, immigrants who arrive during their adolescence may have a relatively easy time adjusting to the United States, because the young adolescent seeking to resolve the crisis of *Identity vs. Identity Confusion* is no longer looking to adult counterplayers for guidance. As parents grow distant in their role as counterplayers to the adolescent immigrants, the adolescent is less receptive to guidance based on the mores of their homeland. This stage is mediated through their peer counterplayers; from peers they can seek a single acculturative message of American society.

An example of the clash of enculturation and acculturation forces, and their potential to hinder development within the social context, is seen in a conflict experienced by a sixth grader named Mei. Mei immigrated to the United States from China two years ago with her parents and a younger sister. Al-

though she did not speak any English when she entered school in the United States, Mei mastered the language of her new nation very quickly and excelled in all of her classes. A housing model she made was so creative that Mei's teacher encouraged her to participate in the SimCity urban planning competition to be held in Washington D.C. Mei was really excited about the prospect of going to the SimCity competition and discussed with her peers her dream of being an architect when she grew up. When Mei tried to explain this exciting opportunity to her parents, they were perplexed. Her parents did not understand why a teacher would encourage a young girl to develop an interest in a field in which she had no prospects for the future because in their experience engineering was a strictly male profession. In the end, Mei's parents decided that she would not attend the SimCity urban planning competition, because it would cause unnecessary distraction from her regular studies.

Female immigrants, in particular, might experience a hindrance in their development because some immigrant communities demand that girls preserve their cultural mores even more than boys. In such cases, the enculturative messages communicated by the parents will be considerably different from those communicated by the school, causing the young girls like Mei to experience a significantly larger amount of distress (Dion and Dion 2001).

Lessons

When thinking about ways we can structure new school programs—and modify existing ones—to meet the needs of new immigrants and their schools, we must keep in mind Erikson's insight that personality develops according to an epigenetic principle. That is, as a person grows and matures, different aspects of personality arise, each having its specific time of ascendancy. If the child is to develop fully, each new personal potential must be supported within a context of significant relationships.

With these considerations in mind, educators and parents must carefully consider how the potential clashes between the processes of enculturation and acculturation can cause deficits in the development of immigrant children. One of the steps that we could take to minimize these negative effects would

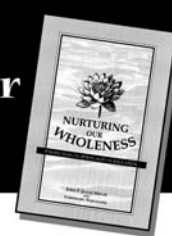
be to facilitate a public dialogue between parents and teachers, which would address the potential areas of conflict. Discussions of this sort could provide us valuable insight into the developmental priorities of teachers and parents, which, if they were in conflict, could be potentially damaging to the development of all children, immigrant and non-immigrant alike, since they together share their learning environment. Erikson in his book *Insight and Responsibility* (1964) provides us with a potential guide to our efforts. He observed that Bernard Shaw warned us not to abide by the golden rule in its traditional form—that is, “do (or do not) unto another what you wish him to do (or not to do) unto you”—because it is impossible to fulfill. How do we know what another wants or does not want to be done to him?

How do we promote those psychological processes that will help rather than hinder people from different cultures at different stages of their development? Erikson (1964, 233) suggests that the golden rule be amended to state that “truly worthwhile acts enhance a mutuality between the doer and the other—a mutuality which strengthens the doer even as it strengthens the other.” Understood in this way, the Rule would say, “Do to another what will strengthen you even as it will strengthen him—that is, what will develop his best potentialities even as it develops your own.”

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