

Invited Symposium Proposal

Title:

Moving Beyond Deficit Perspectives: Can Developmental Research Propose New Approaches to Studying Youth with Refugee and Immigrant Backgrounds?

Chair:

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Integrative Summary

There is a prevalent trend in media, policy discussions, and scientific literature linking youth with immigrant or refugee backgrounds to heightened susceptibility to various risks. Social science research, particularly psychology, has contributed to this perception by studying risks and negative outcomes. Unfortunately, this emphasis on risks has been exploited by right-wing, anti-immigrant political groups to frame immigrants and immigration as problematic, gathering support for their discourse. This trend requires redirection by highlighting the potential in immigrant youth and their contribution to society.

The first paper presents an analysis of the common trends in developmental research, focusing on databases in social science, especially psychology, and proposes several approaches to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the development and adjustment of youth with refugee and immigrant background that moves beyond the deficit approach. The second paper advocates incorporating decade-old strengths-based approaches from fields like teacher education into developmental research, alongside promoting underrepresented scholars in research to pave the way for developing a more insightful research agenda. The third paper critiques dominant theoretical frameworks used in studies on refugee and immigrant groups, and proposes a developmental science perspective, as well as methodologies, that may help researchers to focus on developmental changes, rather than the dichotomies, to achieve a comprehensive understanding of developmental processes and outcomes.

These presentations collectively challenge prevailing views on immigrant and refugee youth, offering alternative approaches to studying their development and adjustment. By embracing a more comprehensive understanding, the field can progress towards a more inclusive and insightful research agenda.

Keywords: Refugee youth, immigrant background, strengths-based, theoretical models, new methods

Are immigrant and refugee youth at-risk? Can we propose a new perspective to understanding development and adjustment of youth with refugee and immigrant background?

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Youth with refugee or immigrant backgrounds have often been defined as vulnerable groups that are at-risk. The term "risk" encompasses a wide range of outcomes, including various internalizing and externalizing problems, as well as poor academic performance and attainment. A keyword search on the Web of Science database for peer-reviewed publications revealed that

approximately 25% of studies on immigrant children and adolescents focused on some form of risk, while only around 3% listed resilience or strength as keywords. These figures indicate the dominance of deficit approaches over strengths-based approaches.

In fact, the majority of youth with refugee or immigrant backgrounds demonstrate adjustment outcomes that are as good as or even better than their native counterparts. Nevertheless, the prevailing approaches of comparing immigrant and refugee youth to their native peers, contrasting trauma-experienced individuals with trauma-free ones, and emphasizing negative findings contribute to the portrayal of immigrants as inherently at-risk.

In this presentation, first, we will provide an overview of current research and the portrayal of youth with refugee or immigrant backgrounds. Second, we will discuss the shortcomings of current comparative approaches in developmental research. Third, we will propose a contextualized developmental approach to enhance understanding of the development and adjustment of youth from diverse backgrounds.

In summary, this paper aims to challenge the prevailing negative discourse about immigrant and refugee children and youth by exploring new ways of interpreting data and empirical findings.

Not All Scholars View Immigrant Youth as “At-risk”

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The author Teju Cole says, “The general is where solidarity begins, but the specific is when our lives come into proper view. We can talk about Paris without generalizing to the rest of Europe. If we know someone or a community well enough, we know not to over-generalize.” Not all scholars hold the view that immigrant youth are at risk, in part because they know the lives of immigrant youth and their communities in great depth and thus may be less likely to essentialize, homogenize, and over-generalize regarding this very diverse group. On the one hand, immigrant youth *are* at risk because of the inequitable societies they live in. They are more likely to experience, for instance, interpersonal, institutional, and historical racism and xenophobia compared to those with no immigration history. On the other hand, evidence from studies and work from other fields and disciplines document the strengths, joys, great heterogeneity, and mundaneness of having an immigrant history. With this background, I discuss two main points. One focuses on an area where some scholars have for a long-time recognized youth strengths—in teacher education. Ideas that were presented decades ago are finding new iterations and expansions, offering perspectives that have refused to only see risk associated with immigrant and minoritized youth. The other discussion point is the necessity of including traditionally excluded scholars in doing this work. Broadening the field of researchers can be an equitable and effective way to move beyond solely deficit-oriented perspectives.

How Developmental Science Can Inform Research on Immigrant Youth?

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Research on immigrant and minority youth is often based on acculturation theories with a social learning, a stress and coping and/or group identification perspective. Most of these theories rely on the dichotomous differentiation between host and heritage cultures. This differentiation, however, may even increase rather than reduce ethnic barriers in modern multicultural societies. In addition, most research in the study of minority and immigrant youth is still rather variable oriented. Despite the fact that longitudinal data are increasingly utilized, a conceptual model of acculturative change is often missing. A Developmental Science perspective may offer solutions to both these challenges. First, it can inform researchers about general (migration-unrelated) processes in immigrant and minority youth adaptation that may co-occur with acculturative change. Second, it can bring forward a more dynamic perspective on change with a strong emphasis on intra-individual change and individual change trajectories. To highlight the potential of a Developmental Science perspective, this presentation will compile theoretical and empirical arguments that challenge the dominant view of immigrant children and youth. On a theoretical level, I will present developmental views that can broaden the perspective on acculturation findings (e.g., acculturation outcomes may be the result of developmental rather than culturecontact processes, novel dynamic concepts may add to our understanding of acculturative change). In addition, on a methodological level, Developmental Science methods will be presented that may add to our understanding. These include dynamic modelling across different time intervals, personoriented methods, as well as experiment-like intervention studies.