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# Immigration distress, mental health status and coping among young immigrants: A 1-year follow-up study

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## ABSTRACT

The current study explores the relationship between psychological difficulty following immigration, and well-being and coping with age-related tasks among emerging adults. In-depth interviews were conducted with 68 young immigrants (19–25 years) from the Former Soviet Union in Israel, focusing on the immigration experience and its related distress. One year later, levels of functioning were assessed (levels of psychological symptoms, reaction to and coping with stressful life events and achievement of developmentally appropriate tasks). Results showed that emotional distress from the immigration experience affected later functioning. However the impact was not uniform. Among emerging adults with initially lower psychological health, experienced immigration distress significantly impacted in a negative way on coping and on the level of independent decision making. Emerging adults with an initially overall healthy psychological organization, while also experiencing immigration distress, were less likely to be negatively affected by it. Results also suggest that a premature tendency to try to cope with cultural ambivalence during the first years following immigration had a negative impact on individuals' coping and functioning.

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## 1. Introduction

This study aims to examine individual differences among emerging adults in the immigration experience, during the first few years following their move to the new country. It focuses on the relationship between the internal experience, as measured by feelings of subjectively experienced distress and the efforts to integrate a bi-cultural identity, and external functioning, as measured through mental health, coping with stressful life events and the achievement of developmentally appropriate tasks (independent decision making, consolidation of their outlook on the world and practical independence, Arnett, 2000; Shulman & Ben-Artzi, 2003). A short longitudinal framework was employed in order to assess the role immigration-related internal experiences impact on subsequent functioning.

### 1.1. Immigration as a potentially positive or negative experience

The process of transition involved in immigration has been described as a potentially positive experience, representing the opportunity for personal growth and self-development (Adler, 1975; Aronowitz, 1984). For example, recent research (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006) on immigrant adolescents in 13 countries, found that immigrant youth were just as well adapted as their national peers and, on the whole, even reported slightly fewer psychological problems, better school

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adjustment and fewer behavioral problems as compared with non-immigrant adolescents. However, at the same time immigration is also a potentially risk-laden, negative experience which can endanger one's identity. This latter phenomenon has been described as 'culture shock' (Garza-Guerrero, 1974; Ticho, 1971) or a 'crisis' (Grinberg & Grinberg, 1989) that occurs as a result of sudden loss of the 'average expectable environment' (Hartmann, 1950) and the move to a strange and unpredictable one. Of note, when very major difficulties are experienced, the immigrant is at risk of developing more severe problems, or "psychopathology" (Berry, 1997).

### 1.2. Immigration and stress

Stress following immigration is expressed in the difficulties that the individual faces in the new country, such as economic hardship, language and cultural gaps, discrimination, and a loss of social, familial and support networks. Quite consistently, adverse impacts of immigration have been found across a variety of domains such as mental health and psychological well-being (e.g. Fenta, Hyman, & Noh, 2004; Ryan, Leavey, Golden, Blizzard, & King, 2006), developmental processes (Berry et al., 2006; Walsh, Shulman, Feldman, & Maurer, 2005), educational achievement (Fuligni, Witkow, & Garcia, 2005; Rumbaut, 2000), and family and social relationships (Fuligni, Yip, & Tseng, 2002; Kwak, 2003; Phinney, Ong, & Madden, 2000; Portes, 1997) among many others.

Based on Oberg's (1960) term of 'culture shock', Furnham (1990) describes six common aspects that characterize immigration-related stress: (1) strain due to the effort required to make necessary psychological adaptations; (2) a sense of loss and feelings of deprivation in regard to friends, status, profession and possessions; (3) being rejected by and rejecting members of the new culture; (4) confusion in role, role expectations, values, feelings and self-identity; (5) surprise, anxiety, disgust and indignation after becoming aware of cultural differences; and (6) feelings of impotence due to not being able to cope with the new environment.

However, stress is not only the result of experiencing loss of the old culture and rejection by the new one. Realization of the cultural gaps between the old and the new culture and anticipation of the extent of required change can also become a source of stress (Berry, Trimble, & Olmedo, 1986; Phinney, 1990). Berry (1997, 1998) in looking at this "acculturation" process identifies a continuum of psychological acculturation involving differing levels of difficulty for the individual. At one end are psychological changes which can be considered to be relatively non-conflictual and easy to accomplish. Referred to as "behavioral shifts" or "culture learning", psychological adaptations to acculturation are a matter of learning a new behavioral repertoire appropriate for the new cultural context. When more conflict occurs, "culture shock" or "acculturative stress" can be considered to take place. While this may be stressful for the individual, the efforts the immigrant makes to cope with acculturative stress also have the potential for growth and future adaptation.

### 1.3. Immigration, stress and internal processes

The process of transition involved in immigration is not only limited to the experience of actual difficulties such as economic hardships or the loss of social ties, and "cultural shifts" (Berry, 1997). Immigration-related stress can be also conceptualized through its impact on the inner world of the immigrant. Research and theory has examined the adverse impact on sense of self (Grinberg & Grinberg, 1989), levels of subjectively experienced immigration distress, vicissitudes in identity (Garza-Guerrero, 1974; Schwartz, Montgomery, & Briones, 2006), and damage to feelings of self-continuity and consistency, and immigration-related ambivalence (Akhtar, 1999) as the immigrant tries to construct a new identity based on a sense of connection to the heritage and new cultures. According to Akhtar (1999) stressful experiences lead to alternating between idealizations and devaluations of the former and new country until the representations can be brought together to form integrated representations of heritage and receiving lands.

This ambivalence has also been explored through research and theorizing on acculturative strategies (Berry, 1997, 1998) which examines the attempt of the immigrant to make sense of his or her connection to two cultural milieu, that of the heritage country and that of the receiving country. Research has showed that the ability to form a multi-faceted identity which incorporates a connection to both identities ("integration"—Berry, 1997) is linked to higher levels of both mental and physical health (Berry & Kim, 1988; Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997; Virta, Sam, & Westin, 2004). Interestingly, recent research (Vedder, van de Vijver, & Liebkind, 2006) has stressed the importance of ethnic orientation, over and above integration, as being important in both psychological and socio-cultural adaptation. In fact, an overly large cultural gap between the heritage and receiving cultures may lead to considerable distress on the part of the individual who attempts to combine both in their identity and risks potential rejection from both cultures (Akhtar, 1999; Rudmin, 2003; Schwartz et al., 2006).

Research has also examined the impact of immigration on one's sense of self. Ben-David (1996), looking at the impact of immigration among Russian immigrants in Israel, found that immigrants showed fewer feelings of confidence in the predictability and explicability of the environment, together with fewer feelings of confidence in one's inner resources. Walsh and Horenczyk (2001) examining English speaking immigrants in Israel, describe the loss of feelings of competence and a sense of belonging. Eleftheriadou (1997) in a study of a young Arab female living in England illustrates the feelings of loss and inner confusion experienced after moving from a familiar cultural framework and the careful exploration needed before a person can feel able to relate to the new context and to him/herself again. McIntyre and Augusto (1999) in their analysis of the 'Martyr adaptation syndrome', amongst Portuguese speaking immigrant women, discuss a two-phase process

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