International Journal of Intercultural Relations 33 (2009) 150–161

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

International Journal of Intercultural Relations

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijintrel

Clarifying the link between acculturation experiences and parent–child relationships among families in cultural transition: The promise of contemporary critiques of acculturation psychology

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Accepted 23 January 2009

Keywords:
Acculturation
Critical approaches
Parent–child relations
Narrative and qualitative approaches

ABSTRACT

The field of acculturation psychology has been the focus of recent critique, calling into question current conceptualizations of acculturation experiences among families in cultural transition. This paper will consider how these critiques can inform theory and research that aims to clarify the link between the process of acculturation and the quality of parent–child relationships among families in cultural transition. For example, while the concepts of process and change are central to psychological approaches to understanding acculturation, this has not always been successfully reflected in choice of research methodology. Further, some theorists highlight the problem of conflating culture and national identity and of homogenizing culture into a few essentialize traits, psychological characteristics or sets of discourses. This paper will outline how a focus on the dynamic and complex process of acculturation opposes ideas of acculturative experiences as acontextual, ahistorical, and independent with some teleological endpoint. It is suggested that acculturation experiences should be reconceptualized as a dialogic, relationally constituted, and continually negotiated (unfinalizable) process. Finally, it is suggested that narrative and qualitative methodologies represent an especially useful way to highlight the fluctuations in acculturative experiences within a family context, and might offer greater promise in clarifying the link between acculturation experiences and the quality of parent–child relationships among families in cultural transition.

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1. Introduction

The field of acculturation psychology is characterized by a large body of studies devoted to documenting the impact of changes in cultural context on parental socialization practices and parent–child relationships (Bornstein & Cote, 2006a, 2006b; Chun & Akutsu, 2003; Santisteban & Mitrani, 2003). The goal of understanding acculturation within a family context offers a uniquely rich opportunity to elucidate the dynamic and multidimensional nature of the acculturation construct and its intricate connection to the quality of family relationships (Bornstein & Cote, 2006a, 2006b; Chia & Costigan, 2006; Chun & Akutsu, 2003; Costigan & Su, 2004). The goal of this paper is to highlight recent critical analyses of acculturation psychology (Bhatia, 2002; Bhatia & Ram, 2001; Bhatia & Stam, 2005; Chirkov, 2009; Gjerde, 2004; Hermans, 2001; Hermans & Kempen, 1998; Rudmin, 2003a, 2003b; Rudmin & Ahmadzadeh, 2001) and to suggest that a close examination of these critiques can help to clarify the link between acculturation experiences and the quality of parent–child relationships among families in

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0147-1767/$ – see front matter © 2009 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1016/j.ijintrel.2009.01.001

cultural transition. Toward this goal, the paper will begin by providing an overview of current research findings on acculturation and family relationships. Next, some key arguments in critical analyses of acculturation theory and research will be presented. These latter critiques may not only be useful to the field of acculturation psychology more generally, but may offer new conceptual and methodological insights to more effectively guide research striving to clarify the link between the process of acculturation and the quality of relationships among families in cultural transition. In conclusion, it is suggested that a reconceptualization of acculturation as a dialogic, relationally constituted and continually negotiated (unfinalizable) process – one that is best captured using narrative and qualitative methodologies – is key to understanding the impact of family members' acculturative experiences on the quality of relationships.

2. The impact of acculturation experiences on parent–child relationships among families in cultural transition: unpacking the empirical evidence

Within both popular culture and academic circles, the process of acculturation has been thought to pave the way for intergenerational stress and elevated levels of conflict among families in cultural transition (e.g., see Bornstein & Cote, 2006a, 2006b; Santisteban & Mitrani, 2003). Problems in differential rates of parent–child acculturation are thought to occur when children begin to acculturate to the new cultural setting more fully and rapidly than their parents, a process which can result in the gradual divergence of cultural values and perspectives among different generations within immigrant families. For example, when a parent wishes to retain exclusively the values of his/her culture of origin and rejects those of the dominant culture which happen to be espoused by his/her child, it can be difficult for both parties to distinguish between the parent's rejection of dominant cultural values and rejection of his/her child as an individual. Indeed, important differences in the quality of parent–child relationships between families in cultural transition, versus those that are not in cultural transition, have been documented across several ethnic groups (Dinh, Sarason, & Sarason, 1994; Kagitcibasi, 1989; Kwak, 2003; Kwak & Berry, 2001; Lazarus, 1997; Min, 1998; Nguyen, Messe, & Stollak, 1999; Rosenthal, 1984; Storer, 1985; Szapocznik, Kurtines, & Fernandez, 1980; Zhou & Bankston, 1998).

In addition, a relevant and large body of intracultural research has focused directly on differential rates of acculturation among immigrant families (*acculturation gaps*). This body of research has provided further support for the link between the acculturation process and the quality of parent–child relationships. One study found that Chinese-American immigrant mothers who perceived a larger acculturation gap between themselves and their child (age 10–14 years) tended to report more parenting difficulties (Buki, Ma, Strom, & Strom, 2003). Similarly, perceived acculturation gaps and/or intergenerational cultural dissonance has been linked to reports of family conflicts and less supportive parenting among Chinese-American youth and adults (Fu, 2002; Weaver & Kim, 2008), Asian-American college students (Dinh & Nguyen, 2006; Lee, Choe, Kim, & Ngo, 2000), Korean American college students (Ahn, Kim, & Park, 2008), Southeast Asian American adolescents (Ying & Han, 2007), Hmong high school students (Rick & Forward, 1992), Vietnamese and Cambodian immigrant families (Choi, He, & Harachi, 2008), and immigrant families with East Asian, Filipino and Latin American backgrounds (Tseng & Fuligni, 2000). Further, studies have shown that immigrant youth who were more acculturated towards Western culture experienced higher levels of family conflict (Cheung-Blunden & Juang, 2008). In addition, greater amounts of adolescent culture brokering have been linked to level of Vietnamese parental behavioural acculturation and with higher reports of conflicts among Vietnamese American immigrant families (Trickett & Jones, 2007). Conversely, Kim and Choi (1994) found that Korean-Canadian adolescents who identified with Korean values perceived their parents as accepting, and less rejecting and hostile, than Korean-Canadian adolescents not adhering to Korean values. In a study of Asian Indian immigrant families living in Los Angeles, adolescents also reported less family conflict when there was no acculturation gap between themselves and their parents (Farver, Narang, & Bhadha, 2002). Finally, in the studies that have directly measured parents' and adolescents' reports of acculturation, greater differences in acculturation were associated with reports of a greater number of conflicts, particularly regarding interpersonal issues, as reported by both Chinese-Canadian immigrant mothers and their teenaged children (Tardif & Geva, 2006), with Chinese-Canadian adolescents' reports of more intense conflicts with their mothers and fathers (Costigan & Dokis, 2006), and with greater family discord among Soviet Jewish refugee youth and their parents (Birman, 2006a).

However, other studies have failed to support the link between the quality of parent–child relationships and differential rates of acculturation among immigrant families, leading some researchers to suggest that the hypothesized link between *acculturation gaps* and the quality of family relationships might be overstated (Lau et al., 2005). For instance, in a study by Sam and Virta (2003) intergenerational value discrepancies were only weakly related to psychological adaptation (e.g., self-esteem, life satisfaction, mental health problems) among immigrant youth living in Sweden and Norway. Fuligni (1998) also found no evidence of generational differences in adolescents' reports of overall conflict and cohesion with their parents between immigrant and native-born adolescents of Mexican, Chinese, Filipino, and European cultural backgrounds. Buchanan (2001) reported similar findings in a study of Russian-American immigrant families. In this study, both qualitative and quantitative results failed to support the hypothesis that gaps in mother–adolescent acculturation would predict family conflict and cohesion. Rather, the mothers and adolescents indicated that although their relationship was in fact characterized by gaps in acculturation, they perceived these gaps as manageable and/or beneficial to the quality of their relationships. In yet another study (Lau et al., 2005), which measured directly both mothers' and adolescents' reports of acculturation in a high risk sample of Mexican American families, discrepancies in parent–adolescent acculturation toward both mainstream and heritage cultures were not related to adolescents' perceptions of increased intergenerational conflicts.

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