



Aggression and conduct disorder in former Soviet Union immigrant adolescents: The role of parenting style and ego identity

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ABSTRACT

The study examined aggression, guilt feelings and conduct disorder (CD) in adolescent immigrants from the Former Soviet Union. One hundred and nineteen adolescents, including sixty six immigrants and fifty native Israelis from four residential schools, completed questionnaires assessing level of aggression, sense of guilt, ego identity, and parenting style. Objective assessments of CD were obtained from instructors at the residential schools, using the CBCL. Results indicate that diffused ego identity is the strongest predictor of aggression, guilt, and CD. A lack of positive parenting moderates the link between diffused ego identity and aggression and CD, while positive parenting promotes a sense of guilt, especially in the immigrant group. These results warrant cultural identity-sensitive interventions.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Distress among adolescents who immigrated to Israel from the Former Soviet Union

Research on adolescents who immigrated to Israel from the Former Soviet Union (FSU) has pointed to various direct and indirect expressions of distress among them (Ullman & Tatar, 2001). Psychiatric epidemiological studies conducted in Israel in recent years have shown relatively high levels of psychological distress among FSU adolescents compared with similar samples from the host population (Mirsky, 1997; Ponizovsky, Ritsner, & Modai, 1999). Adolescent immigrants face the complex task of forming their own identity while simultaneously adjusting to the culture of their new country, putting them at greater risk of psychological distress when compared to native born adolescents. Such psychological distress may impair these adolescents' ability to form their own identity during adolescence, and is often manifested in symptoms of conduct disorder, withdrawal, depression and isolation. The groundwork is thus laid for identification with non-normative, socially deviant peer-groups (Ullman & Tatar, 2001). One result is the dramatic increase in crime rates found among immigrant FSU adolescents in Israel (Israeli National Council for the Child, 2009). Furthermore, research has indicated that the parenting patterns of FSU immigrants are

characterized by harsh punishment and control, assimilated through the Soviet regime's style of education. Parenting based on harsh punishment with little positive reinforcement has been linked with behavior disorders (Kim-Cohen et al., 2003; Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989).

However, there has been little research examining conduct and behavior disorders among FSU adolescents. Given this gap in the literature, the goal of the present study is to examine whether perceived parental behaviors and impairment in ego identity are linked to conduct disorder among immigrant adolescents from the FSU (compared with native Israeli adolescents).

The Former Soviet Union (FSU) has been the main source of immigration to Israel since the 1970s. Demographically, the children of these new immigrants accounted for 10% of all children in Israel in 2008. The portion of FSU immigrant minors aged twelve to seventeen who are suspected of criminal activity is double that of native Israeli minors (14.3% compared to 7.1%), meaning that on average, every FSU immigrant minor has 1.7 criminal records. The school dropout rate for FSU immigrant children is twice that of native Israelis, reaching 3.8%. Approximately 68.2% of all FSU immigrant children listed with the Social Services are considered to be at risk, either directly or as part of a family at risk (Israeli National Council for the Child, 2009).

Residential educational settings provide an alternative framework for immigrant youth, offering solutions for some of the urgent problems of families in cultural transition. They free the parents to attend to practical problems characteristic of the initial stages of immigration, such as the pursuit of livelihood and suitable residence, acquisition of the new language, and familiarization with new cultural norms (Eisikovits & Shamai, 2001).

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In 2008, 2.27% of the child population in Israel was living in residential schools, 97% of them between the ages of 12 and 18 (Israeli National Council for the Child, 2009). This is a higher percentage than in most countries (Arieli, 1999). FSU immigrant children make up approximately one quarter (22.7%) of all children living in residential schools, while constituting only 10% of all children in Israel (Israeli National Council for the Child, 2009).

In the 1950s, Israel's formative years as a state, the residential schools were perceived as the ideal vehicle of acculturation for the huge wave of immigrant families and their children. In the following years residential schools in Israel often served as facilities for the educational advancement of youth from socio-economically disadvantaged strata. Thus the function and role of the residential schools changed, and they gradually began to take in children at risk and children whose families could not provide their essential needs (Arieli, 1999).

The present study was conducted in residential schools, and is aimed at the investigation of conduct disorder among immigrant adolescents from FSU in comparison to native Israelis, as reported by the adolescents themselves and by their residential school instructors. We will initially discuss the research on conduct disorder among immigrant adolescents from FSU; this will be followed by a review of the contributions made by parental behavior and identity formation to conduct disorder in immigrant adolescents.

1.2. Conduct disorders in immigrant adolescents from FSU

Childhood conduct disorder presents considerable social and clinical concerns. Conduct disorder is a repetitive and persistent pattern of behavior in which the basic rights of others, or major age-appropriate societal norms or rules, are violated. These behaviors fall into four main groupings: aggressive conduct that causes or threatens physical harm to other people or animals, destruction of property, deceitfulness or theft, and serious violations of rules (American Psychiatric Association, DSM-IV-TR, 2000). One of the powerful and crucial inner guiding mechanisms that inhibit disruptive and antisocial conduct and promote conscience is guilt feelings. Guilt is an emotional arousal and discomfort associated with one's actual or even contemplated transgressions. Multiple developmental, social and clinical approaches, classic and recent, from early psychoanalysis to contemporary affective neuroscience, have emphasized the role of guilt and discomfort associated with past transgressions in the development of rule-compatible conduct. Lack of guilt and/or remorse, and lack of empathy towards others upon whom one has inflicted acts of violence, are part of the core deficit in the developmental pathway toward conduct disorder and later psychopathy (Kochanska, Barry, Jimenez, Hollatz, & Woodard, 2009).

Research has shown high rates of conduct disorder, violence and antisocial behavior among adolescents who immigrated to Israel from the FSU (Sukhodolsky & Ruchkin, 2004; Tartakovsky & Mirsky, 2001; Tatar, 1998). It has also been reported that in Israel, these adolescent immigrants drink more alcohol more frequently than Israeli-born adolescents (Israelowitz & Reznik, 2007; Slonim-Nevo & Sharaga, 2000). Tartakovsky and Mirsky (2001) described bullying, physical violence, alcohol and drug consumption, and petty theft in gangs of adolescents who immigrated to Israel from the FSU without their parents. They suggested that gang membership can be viewed as a defense mechanism employed in an attempt to regain control in an unfamiliar environment and to attain a sense of belonging. Trickett and Birman (2005), who examined school adaptation among immigrant adolescents from the FSU in the USA, also reported disciplinary infractions and getting into trouble with school rules and authorities, which they explained by the breakdown of the parental sources of support.

Strong evidence exists that parental factors play a critical role in the development of conduct disorder (Barry, Frick, & Grafeman, 2008;

De Clercq, Van Leeuwen, De Fruyt, Van Hiel, & Mervielde, 2008; Ruchkin, Eisemann, Hägggläff, & Cloninger, 1998). During the immigration process many of the parents suffer severe distress, preventing them from integrating socially and economically into the new society and consequently impairing their ability to be a support resource for their children (Eisikovits & Shamai, 2001; Safo & Ponizovsky, 1996).

1.3. Parenting style and immigration from FSU

Immigration constitutes one of the most comprehensive and pervasive changes in family life. Although family members can be a source of comfort and support for one another during the immigration process, it is not uncommon to find a tense atmosphere weakening family roles and internal connections. Research in Israel has shown that FSU immigrant adolescents' perceptions of parental attitudes and support predict their functioning (Ben-David, 1996; Oznobishin & Kurman, 2009; Slonim-Nevo, Mirsky, Rubinstein, & Nauck, 2009), emphasizing the importance of such support. However, several studies have documented a decline in family functioning and parental coping, problems in affective relationships and communication between immigrant parents and their children, and difficulties in maintaining a stable, supportive setting with clear and well-delineated boundaries. Financial worries, cultural differences and inadequate command of the spoken language also make it difficult for many parents to be involved in their children's learning process and functioning (Ben-David, 1996; Dwairy & Dor, 2009; Jones & Trickett, 2005; Yakhnich & Ben-Zur, 2008). Due to tremendous reduction in family resources after immigration, including an increase in the number of single-parent households, these adolescents receive less support from their parents than their Israeli-born peers and at the same time assume parental roles and responsibilities in their families (Oznobishin & Kurman, 2009). They report feeling less connected to their families and experiencing their parents as less warm, more inconsistent and more controlling in their childrearing behaviors, than nonimmigrant adolescents (Dwairy & Dor, 2009).

Moreover, immigration to a Western country undermines traditional parental styles and challenges parental authority. Shor (2000) emphasized the harsh childrearing practices of immigrant parents from the FSU. In accordance with Soviet childrearing literature recommending parental withdrawal of love and privileges as a method of punishment, immigrant parents report that in cases of child misbehavior or disobedience they tend to employ restrictive methods such as isolating or ignoring the child (Shor, 2000). These changes in the family, in addition to the immigration crisis, with the resulting breakdown of old norms and the weakening of parental authority, place immigrant adolescents in jeopardy for impairment in the consolidation of an integrative ego identity.

1.4. Immigration and ego identity

Erik Erikson laid out a blueprint for a coherent view of identity development. He suggested (Erikson, 1968) that the main psychosocial challenge of adolescence is to move from identity diffusion to achievement of a firm integrative identity. Adolescents who attain the identity achievement status are characterized by greater self-definition, constancy, and sense of psychological well-being than those still in the 'identity diffusion' status. Adolescents develop their identity and value system by adopting an ideological stance juxtaposed to that of their parents (Knafo & Schwartz, 2001), while the maintenance of a warm and supportive relationship with the parents contributes to the consolidation of an integrative identity (Besser & Blatt, 2007).

A possible source of distress particularly relevant to the immigrant adolescent is the need to restructure valued aspects of the self. Following immigration, absorption into a new culture demands a redefinition of the self in terms of ethnic identity, values, and

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