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With a little help from my child: A dyad approach to immigrant mothers' and adolescents' socio-cultural adaptation

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ABSTRACT

Intergenerational adjustment theories suggest that immigrant adolescents may be particularly influential in their families, as they take on family obligations and serve as language brokers. Empirical research in this regard is, however, scarce. One aim of this study was to test whether adolescents' linguistic competence in German adds to the explanation of maternal socio-cultural adaptation difficulties in Germany. Another aim was to investigate whether the association between adolescents' linguistic competence and maternal socio-cultural adaptation difficulties differs depending on adolescents' involvement in family obligations. The sample comprised 185 ethnic German immigrant mother-adolescent dyads from the former Soviet Union (15.7 years old; 60% female). Results of Actor-Partner Interdependence Models, which were developed for dyad data analysis, indicated that mothers of adolescents with a good command of German indeed report fewer socio-cultural adaptation difficulties. The transmission effect from adolescent to mother was particularly pronounced when the adolescent was heavily involved in family obligations.

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Often in public and scientific debate, children and adolescents are perceived as the object of education, formed by parental or school socialisation goals. Such models present parents, peers, or school as sources shaping individual adolescent behavior (e.g., [Kandel & Andrews, 1987](#)). This rather passive view on adolescent development is, however, being increasingly challenged by theories focusing on adolescents' agency and intentional self-regulation (e.g., [Gestsdottir & Lerner, 2008](#)). Particularly, theoretical ideas on positive youth development highlight adolescents' "...abilities to organise and regulate actions over time to work toward a long-term goal, as an individual or with others, in complex real-world contexts" ([Larson, 2011](#), p. 318). This rather active adolescent behavior seems particularly likely to be observed in immigrant families. Studies have repeatedly showed that about 90% of immigrant adolescents translate various documents for their parents - at least occasionally ([Jones & Trickett, 2005](#); [Schulz, Titzmann, & Michel, 2013](#)), a behavior that has been termed language brokering. But family obligations in immigrant families are not restricted to language brokering alone. Immigrant adolescents have also

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been found to assist their parents in daily household management and financial matters (Fuligni & Telzer, 2012) as well as in the provision of instrumental and emotional support to their parents (Titzmann, 2012; Walsh, Shulman, Bar-On, & Tsur, 2006). The consequences of adolescents' support for their parents are less clear: some studies revealed beneficial effects by pointing out the potential for social competence and problem solving (Hooper, Marotta, & Lanthier, 2008; Jurkovic, 1997), other studies, however, find risks in terms of depressivity or distress (e.g., Hua & Costigan, 2012; Kam & Lazarevic, 2014; Kim, Hou, & Gonzalez, 2016).

Particularly in the acculturation literature, these phenomena have led to the assumption that enculturation and socialisation in immigrant families is not only one-directional (from parents to children), but rather reciprocal (Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 2002). Some authors even assume that a role reversal takes place in which the family hierarchy is reversed with children and adolescents gaining in status, more than is normative in this age group (Oznobishin & Kurman, 2009; Portes, 1997). The core of these assumptions is that immigrant adolescents affect their parents' adaptation and that the parents' influence on the children is limited. However, this assumption was rarely tested empirically, but merely inferred based on adolescents' family obligations, limiting the validity of the inferences. Recent methodological developments, however, allow for a more thorough testing of effects, based on dyadic data (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). The strength of our study was the use of dyadic data and the investigation of mother-adolescent interactions. More specifically, we wanted to know whether immigrant adolescents' linguistic competence in German adds to the explanation of their mothers' socio-cultural adaptation difficulties beyond their mothers' own linguistic competence in German and vice versa. In addition, we were interested in whether the association between adolescents' German language competence and mothers' socio-cultural adaptation difficulties varied as a function of adolescents' level of family obligations, also termed parentification. For our study, we defined the age range for adolescence as between 10 and 18 years. The age of 10 marks the biological onset of puberty, because around this age some girls experience their first menarche (Anderson, Dallal, & Must, 2003). In addition, family obligations, such as language brokering tasks, typically start at an age of between 8 and 9 years (Morales & Hanson, 2005). The age of 18 was chosen as the cut-off, because adolescents legally attain full age at that point in time.

1. Mother-adolescent interactions in immigrant families

Interactions within families are rather complex behaviors, because they involve multiple actors (parents, siblings, grandparents etc.). Covering this complexity in one single study is nearly impossible. Hence, we confined ourselves to the study of dyadic interactions between mothers and their adolescent children. We focused on this family dyad, because mothers have been found to be particularly influential in their offspring's development and adaptation. Mothers spend, for example, more time with their children than fathers do (Dubas & Gerris, 2002; Updegraff, McHale, Crouter, & Kupanoff, 2001), and the mother-child relationship is more stable than the father-child relationship (Rodríguez, Perez-Brena, Updegraff, & Umaña-Taylor, 2014). In general, the dynamic interactions imply intergenerational transmission effects within the mother-adolescent relationship. However, results are less clear with regard to the direction of effects, particularly when focusing on the prediction of sociocultural adaptation to a new society. On the one hand, classic socialisation or enculturation models would assume that parents socialise their children by direct influence (role modelling or imitation), by exposing the offspring to social reinforcement (norms), or by indirectly affecting their children through altering the behavior of others so that it complies with parental ideas of growing up (Kandel & Andrews, 1987).

On the other hand, there are empirical findings showing that children in immigrant families adapt more easily and more quickly to the new society (Cheung, Chudek, & Heine, 2011), a finding that cannot be explained by these classic one-way parent-to-child models. In fact, although it is not the norm in all families (Telzer, 2011), various studies report an acculturative dissonance with children and adolescents being better adjusted than their parents (e.g., Ho & Birman, 2010; Titzmann & Sonnenberg, 2016). This advantage can be explained by adolescents' increased level of contact with members of the host society through school attendance (Telzer, 2011), but also by developmental processes, such as the easier acquisition of new languages in younger years (Birdsong & Vanhove, 2016). The linguistic advantage possessed by adolescents makes it also more likely that they will become the sender rather than the receiver of information about the new society, a supposition that is supported by immigrant adolescents' roles as family language brokers (Jones & Trickett, 2005; Schulz et al., 2013) or by immigrant adolescents' elevated levels in parentification (Titzmann, 2012; Walsh et al., 2006). Parentification is a process whereby adolescents are assigned or assume roles normally reserved for adults, for example by instrumental and emotional caregiving to their parents (Jurkovic, Thirkield, & Morrell, 2001; Williams & Francis, 2010). The dynamic interplay of mother-adolescent socio-cultural adaptation is, hence, less clear with regard to the direction of effects.

For the current study, we used the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM). The APIM is based on a structural equation framework that allows the estimation of Actor and Partner effects in cross-sectional data. One requirement is that data are provided by two sources independently: Actor and Partner who have to provide data on the same variables (predictors and outcomes). These variables are entered simultaneously into a structural equation model in which predictors of both Actor and Partner are set to predict both outcomes (Actor and Partner). Actor effects describe the concurrent association between person A's predictor and their developmental outcome. The Partner effect is the effect of person B's predictor (same variable as the predictor in person A) on person A's developmental outcome after controlling for person A's own effects on this outcome (Kenny et al., 2006). The same logic applies in the prediction of person B's outcome. In our research question, the developmental outcomes are socio-cultural adaptation difficulties of mothers and adolescents, which are defined as difficulties in "the ability to 'fit in,' to acquire culturally appropriate skills and to negotiate interactive aspects of the host

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