



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

## International Journal of Intercultural Relations

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/ijintrel](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/ijintrel)

# Immigrant's emotional reactions to filial responsibilities and related psychological outcomes<sup>☆</sup>



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 10 September 2014

Received in revised form 27 January 2015

Accepted 4 February 2015

### Keywords:

Filial responsibility

Emotional reactions

Post-migration role reversal

Family processes

Immigration

Adjustment

## ABSTRACT

Many young family members adopt parental roles to assist their parents to cope with immigration-related difficulties and challenges. This phenomenon is known as post-migration filial responsibility. In this study we retrospectively examined the relationships between emotional reactions of immigrant children to filial responsibilities in their families of origin and their following psychological adjustment. Based on previous qualitative findings, the *Emotional Reaction to Filial Responsibility scale* (ERFR) was developed. A sample of 220 young adults (age 20–35), who immigrated to Israel from the former Soviet Union at age of 6–15, completed questionnaires evaluating filial responsibilities and emotional reactions to them retrospectively, as well as indications for present psychological adjustment (the Brief Symptom Inventory and the General Self-Efficacy Scale). The filial responsibility domains differentially predicted two reactions: cultural brokering predicted Distress scale, whereas emotional support to parents predicted Pride scale. The self-reliance domain was positively associated with Distress scale, but negatively with Pride scale. Hierarchical regressions indicated that these emotional reactions predict different aspects of adjustment: Pride scale predicted self-efficacy, whereas Distress scale predicted psychological symptoms. The emotional reactions demonstrated unique predictive ability above and beyond that of the filial responsibility domains. Thus, these reactions are better predictors of post-migration adjustment difficulties than the behaviors per se. Social services and clinicians should address the emotional reactions to filial responsibilities when working with immigrant children.

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## 1. Introduction

Immigration is a multifaceted event that initiates a process of extended change and adaptation in all life domains (e.g., Hernandez & McGoldrick, 1999). Some of these changes include adjusting to a new social environment, language, culture, and job market. Moreover, immigration often undermines social resources and familial support systems and affects the stability

<sup>☆</sup> This research is a part of the first author's PhD dissertation and was supported by the Harry and Sylvia Hoffman leadership and responsibility program and Nira Shenhar Foundation, promoting studies on immigrant absorption in Israel. The authors wish to thank David Bargal, Rena Kurs, Olga Oznobishin and Alexander. M. Ponizovsky for their assistance at different stages of this study.

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and continuity of family roles (Fong, 2004; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Children are more open to accept new norms and values, and they typically acquire the host language quicker than their parents. Under such circumstances, family reliance on children may increase and the child's role repertoire in the family is likely to expand (Mirsky & Prawer, 2003; Remennick, 2007). Indeed, many immigrant children serve as language and culture brokers (e.g., Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Role reversal in immigration has been defined as "filial responsibility" to avoid the pathological connotations of earlier definitions (Jurkovic et al., 2004).

A previous study identified six distinct filial responsibility domains among young immigrants from former Soviet Union to Israel (Ponizovsky, Kurman, & Roer-Strier, 2012). The domains were general dominance in the family, brokering roles (i.e., language and cultural brokering), emotional roles (i.e., emotional support to parents and self-reliance) and money issues. Children's general dominance integrates several family roles such as family navigator, partner in family management, family administrator and family leader. The language broker role includes accompanying parents to appointments, translating letters, filling in forms, and other duties involving translation. The cultural broker includes mediation and guidance through the values and behavioral codes of the host culture. Emotional support to parents includes comforting, giving advice and encouragement to parents. Self-reliance reflects the need to cope alone and emphasizes high independence and high coping levels. Money issues concern working and sharing the earned money with the family (Ponizovsky et al., 2012).

Several studies investigated the relations between filial responsibility resulting from immigration and adjustment (e.g., Jurkovic et al., 2004; Kuperminc, Jurkovic, & Casey, 2009; Oznobishin & Kurman, 2009). Nonetheless, the emotional reactions to the responsibilities may be more pivotal in predicting adjustment than the roles that have been undertaken. Weisskirch's findings (2007) regarding language brokering hint in this direction. He found that positive emotions (i.e., calm, happy, proud, and useful) and negative emotions (i.e., angry, nervous, obligated, scared, and uncomfortable) were more predictive of self-esteem than language brokering itself. Emotional reactions to various filial responsibilities beyond language brokering have not yet been systematically studied. It is of interest to gain more knowledge about the phenomenon and to explore whether it can be generalized to other roles and adjustment indicators.

The centrality of the "perceived fairness" component of parentification (Jurkovic, 1997) is somewhat relevant to emotional reactions to the responsibilities undertaken. Perceived fairness relates to whether the responsibilities in the family are distributed in a manner that supports relational fairness and trust, considering the members' capabilities, resources, burdens, and obligations (Boszormenyi-Nagi & Krasner, 1986). Previous studies found that perceived fairness moderated associations of filial responsibilities with a range of adjustment outcomes such as social self-efficacy, school adjustment and behavioral restraint (Jurkovic, Kuperminc, Sarac, & Weisshaar, 2005; Kuperminc et al., 2009) and generally predicted decline in psychological distress (Kuperminc, Wilkins, Jurkovic, & Perilla, 2013). As unfairness creates negative feelings almost by definition, it could be assumed that part of the strength of this variable as a predictor and moderator stems from the emotional component embedded in it.

Research on traditional role reversal and on language brokering found both negative and positive implications for the adjustment of young immigrants to the social environment in the host country. Among others, negative outcomes included emotional, behavioral, and somatic problems in children, adolescents and young adults (e.g., Chase, Deming, & Wells, 1998; Lopez, 1986; Oznobishin & Kurman, 2009; Peris, Goeke-Morey, Cummings, & Emery, 2008; Stein, Riedel, & Rotheram-Borus, 1999; Umaña-Taylor, 2003; Williams & Francis, 2010). At the same time, positive implications such as social self-efficacy, empowerment and academic performance have been reported (e.g., Acoach & Webb, 2004; Orellana, Reynolds, Dornier, & Meza, 2003; Titzmann, 2012; Tse, 1995; Weisskirch, 2013). Accordingly, we assumed that similar duality would be manifested in emotional reactions to filial responsibilities.

Following the findings regarding the positive and negative effects of filial responsibilities, a meaningful body of research on moderating factors has attempted to explain which circumstances would result in positive or negative adjustment outcomes. For instance, culture (e.g., Wu & Kim, 2009), problematic family relations (Tardif-Williams & Fisher, 2009; Weisskirch, 2007, 2013), and perception of the roles as meaningful (Kiang, 2012) were established to have moderating effects regarding the relations between filial responsibilities and adjustment.

The present study suggested a different perspective and assumed that the positive and negative emotional reactions to filial responsibilities are not mutually exclusive and can appear simultaneously. A premise to this assumption are findings of a qualitative study that examined perceived effects of role change among adolescents and young adult immigrants from the Former Soviet Union to Israel (Kosner, Roer Strier, & Kurman, 2014). This study described both perceived negative outcomes of role change due to immigration (e.g., distressing emotions and feelings of a "lost childhood") and perceived positive outcomes (e.g., gaining independence, life experience, sense of satisfaction with role change and self-efficacy) as occurring simultaneously.

We anchor our work within the *alternating method* model (Roer-Strier & Kurman, 2009) in which research efforts alternate between qualitative and quantitative components, each stage building on the previous one that used a different method. Based on the findings of the above qualitative study we developed the *Emotional Reaction to Filial Responsibility scale* (ERFR) that was used in the present study. It consists of two separate scales, of positive (i.e., Pride) and negative (i.e., Distress) emotional responses to filial responsibilities that enable investigation of each emotion separately. Watson and Tellegen (1985) re-analyzed a number of studies of self-reported mood, and showed that positive and negative affects have consistently emerged as two dominant and relatively independent dimensions in factor-analyses. Although the terms Positive Affect and Negative Affect might suggest that these two mood factors are opposites, they have in fact appeared as highly distinctive dimensions that can be meaningfully represented as orthogonal. With respect to post-migration filial responsibility, young

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