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Parenting in acculturation: Two contemporary research designs and what they tell us

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Abstract

Massive population transfers are common today. To understand how immigrants negotiate variation and adjustment as they settle in a new culture, researchers have explored acculturation, the changes that individuals and groups undergo as a result of contact with a culture not their own. Parents have crucial roles to play in acculturation. Parenting is instantiated in cognitions and practices, and cognitions and practices of parents are multifaceted and influenced by many factors, including parents' own individual characteristics, their children, and their cultural experiences. This article describes, evaluates, and illustrates two unique research designs that are used today to study acculturation of parenting cognitions and practices. In one design, parenting in acculturating cultures in the same culture of destination are compared; in the second design, parents in a culture of origin, parents from that culture of origin acculturating to a new culture, and parents in that culture of destination are compared. Acculturation is one of the most prominent individual-difference constructs in contemporary psychology, and understanding parents' cognitions and practices is fundamental to understanding parenting and acculturation.

Keywords

acculturation; parenting; migrants; cognitions; practices

Introduction

Massive population transfers are common today. The United Nations (U.N.) Population Division reported that as of 2015 nearly 245 million people live outside the country of their birth or citizenship; that translates into roughly 1 in every 30 people on the face of the globe [1]. Absent backlash, the future portends more of the same. A Gallup survey reported that nearly 700 million adults would like to migrate to another country permanently. To understand how immigrants negotiate variation and adjustment as they settle in a new

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culture, researchers have explored the phenomenon of *acculturation*. Acculturation describes changes that individuals and groups undergo as a result of contact with another culture.

Parents have an especially crucial role to play in acculturation. For example, one quarter of children under the age of 5 in the United States have at least one foreign-born parent, and their ranks are expected to swell in the 21st century [2]. *Parenting* is instantiated in cognitions and practices, and cognitions and practices of parents are multifaceted and influenced by many factors, including (at least) parents' own individual characteristics, their children, and their cultural experiences [3]. Parenting cognitions include attributions, perceptions, goals, expectations, attitudes, and knowledge of child rearing and child development. Parenting cognitions are meritorious of study in their own right, and they are important to understand because they can influence parenting practices and children's development. Parents' practices often give expression to parenting cognitions and constitute a large measure of children's worldly experience. They span nurturant, physical, social, didactic, verbal, and material domains of caregiving.

It is informative to study parental beliefs and behaviors among immigrant groups because parenting beliefs and behaviors differ across cultural groups [4] and acculturate differently. For example, U.S. European American parenting tends to encourage children's interpersonal independence as well as interest in and exploration of the environment, whereas Argentine and Japanese parenting emphasizes interdependence between dyad members, and these parents tend to engage in more social interactions with their children. U.S. European American culture prizes individual effort, where mothers see parenting as a personal achievement. Consistent with virtues of Korean culture -- *guan-sin* (parental attentiveness to children), *jung-sung* (parental devotion to children and their care), and *chek-im* (parental responsibility for teaching children what they need to know) -- South Korean mothers report being highly invested in parenting. Immigrant parents or parents-to-be from these cultures arriving on U.S. shores can expect to acculturate. As a result of the differing world views in immigrants' countries of origin and destination, one might wonder what parenting is like for immigrants who were born and reared in one culture but who take up residence and must socialize their offspring to succeed in a different culture. This article describes and evaluates two unique research designs and some illustrative findings that are used today to study acculturation of parenting cognitions and practices.

Design

Compare parents in acculturating groups from different cultures of origin in the same culture of destination (e.g., Japanese American, Korean American, and South American parents in the United States); cultures of origin differ on psychocultural factors (e.g., representing Eastern and Western cultures with different histories, beliefs, and values), but parents are comparable on other sociodemographic characteristics (e.g., SES, age, education, parity, duration in the culture of destination, immigrants not refugees at the same historical point in time).

What the design can tell us

This design provides insight into the influence of cultures of origin and culture of destination on parenting beliefs and behaviors among different cultural groups. Recruiting more than one comparison group in a single study using a uniform methodology permits examination of generalities and specificities in the acculturation of parenting.

Illustrations

Parents' knowledge about child rearing and child development is relevant to pediatric practice, but little is known about immigrant parents' knowledge. Knowledge of developmental milestones is also important because early intervention is key to preventing long-term problems in children. If parents are unaware of normal developmental milestones, they will be less likely to recognize and raise problems with their child's pediatrician. One study compared parenting knowledge in Japanese and South American immigrant mothers of 2-year-olds and compared their data with European American mothers. Immigrant mothers scored lower than otherwise comparable U.S. mothers [5]. The majority of immigrant mothers did not know correct answers for 25% of items, a difference that remained when mothers' education level was controlled. Insofar as expectations or the actual attainment of developmental skills and behaviors or illness states differ among members of diverse cultural groups, awareness of such differences helps clinicians accurately interpret the significance of parents' reports about children's health and development.

Typically developing human infants are born with a capacity to learn language. What is in dispute is how experience and biology influence rates of language acquisition. One study examined the extent to which variability in maternal input influences children's language acquisition by comparing samples of bilingual immigrant children to their monolingual peers. By definition, monolingual children receive 100% of their input in a single language, and bilingual children receive complementary fractions of their input in each of two languages. As input matters to vocabulary acquisition, there should be individual differences in children's vocabulary acquisition as a result of differential input. The amount of input monolingual children receive in a given language is positively related to their vocabulary size in that language, and this same association obtains among children being reared bilingually from birth. One study investigated maternal language input for bilingual children's vocabulary development in Latin, Japanese, and Korean immigrant families [6]. Maternal degree of acculturation predicted the amount of maternal input in each language, which then predicted immigrant children's vocabulary size in each language. Maternal acculturation also predicted children's English-language vocabulary size.

Comments

This acculturation design is geared to identify which realms of parenting and child development change (and which do not) and which call for special attention and cultural sensitivity (and which do not) in the dynamics of different immigrant families. Parenting cognitions and practices alike should be taken into account when assessing immigrants' parenting.

Design

Compare immigrants' parenting cognitions and practices with parents still in their culture of origin and with parents in their culture of destination. The anchoring samples should differ in parenting cognitions and practices. On applied, cultural, and methodological grounds, it is also desirable to adhere to the other design characteristics as Design 1.

What this design tells us

Investigating parenting in an immigrant group and the nonimmigrant dominant groups in the cultures of origin and destination, respective, reveals how, and the extent to which, immigrant parents retain the cognitions and practices of their culture of origin and incorporate those of their culture of destination. Evaluating the acculturation of multiple parenting cognitions and practices in immigrants in more than one three-way comparison shows whether the acculturation of parenting cognitions and practices proceeds in a general or cognition- or practice-specific fashion and in a general or culture-specific fashion.

Illustrations

Japanese immigrant mothers' attributions and self-perceptions were more like those of mothers in their country of origin (Japan) or intermediate to those of mothers in their countries of origin (Japan) and destination (the United States). In contrast, attributions and self-perceptions of South American immigrant mothers in the United States were more like those in their country of destination.

In the United States, play is a stage and toys the objects of communication; in Japan and Argentina, play and toys predominantly mediate dyadic interaction for itself. U.S. mothers tend to highlight exploratory object play, whereas Japanese and Argentine mothers tend to stress symbolic play. In three-way studies of maternal play, South American immigrant mothers demonstrated and solicited more exploratory play than Argentine mothers, Japanese mothers solicited more symbolic play, and Argentine mothers demonstrated more symbolic play than immigrant mothers. The play of Japanese and South American immigrant mothers was more similar to European American mothers' play than to mothers in their respective countries of origin [8].

Comments

These results limit the generalizability of acculturation by parenting task, setting, and population, and acculturation should not be taken as stereotypical of all parents. A universal model of acculturation that dictates uniform patterns of acculturation for all cognitions and practices appears inappropriate. Instead, acculturation of parenting appears to be influenced by the cultural groups being compared and the cognitions and practices being evaluated, supporting specificity views of parenting and acculturation [9,10**].

Interpretations

Common responses observed in parents' cognitions and practices could reflect one or more sources, including native panhuman tendencies in parenting, triggered by a common evolutionary root of both parenting and child development; shared reactions to similarities in

developmental experiences, intact nuclear families, or urbanized, industrialized, and developed societies; historical convergences in parenting; or an increasing prevalence of homogeneous parenting beliefs and behaviors resulting from exposure to education or mass media. These causes are related and not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Investigating acculturation at the group level, by comparing immigrant parents with parents in their cultures of origin and destination, leaves unresolved whether immigrant parents' cognitions and practices acculturated (i.e., whether they were similar to parents in their culture of origin prior to immigration and different from them afterwards) or whether immigrants might have differed from parents in their culture of origin before immigration. Differentiated patterns of results by culture discourage the latter explanation. One way to disentangle whether parents' beliefs and behaviors acculturate or were always different from that of parents who chose to remain in their culture of origin would be to study parenting beliefs and behaviors longitudinally, before and after parents immigrate.

Conclusion

Acculturation has risen to become one of the most prominent individual-difference constructs in contemporary psychology. It is hardly surprising that there has been a corresponding increase in studies occupied with where, how, why, and in whom acculturation transpires. The results of this burgeoning literature and its implications have now begun to refine our understanding of interculturals, their psychological functioning and well-being, as well as psychologies of their cultures of origin and destination. As we see, parents stand at the nexus of these dynamic forces.

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- 10**. Bornstein MH. The specificity principle in acculturation science. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*. 2017; 12:3–45. The Specificity Principle in Acculturation Science asserts that specific setting conditions of specific people at specific times moderate specific domains in acculturation by specific processes. Understanding acculturation depends critically on what is studied where, in whom, how, and when. This article defines, explains, and illustrates the Specificity Principle in Acculturation Science. Research hypotheses about acculturation can be more adequately tested, inconsistencies and discrepancies in the acculturation literature can be satisfactorily resolved, acculturation interventions can be tailored to be more successful, and acculturation policies can be brought to new levels of effectiveness if the specificity principle that governs acculturation science is more widely recognized. [PubMed: 28073331]

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Bullet Points

- Acculturation describes changes that individuals and groups in one culture undergo as a result of contact with a new culture.
- Parents play crucial roles to in acculturation; they must socialize their offspring to succeed in a non-native culture.
- Parenting is instantiated in cognitions and practices, which are multifaceted and influenced by many factors, including their cultural experiences.
- Two unique comparative research designs include (1) parenting in acculturating cultures in the same culture, and (2) parenting in a culture of origin, an acculturating culture, and a culture of destination.
- Acculturation of parenting cognitions and practices is likely a function of many moderators.

Design 1. Parenting in acculturating cultures in the same culture of destination

Attributions about successes and failures in parenting and self-perceptions of parenting were compared in Japanese American and South American immigrant mothers to the United States. South American mothers endorsed ability and task ease as causes of their parenting successes more strongly than Japanese American mothers, but no differences in mothers' attributions to mothers' effort or mood or child behavior emerged. South American mothers also reported that they were more satisfied with the parenting role than Japanese American mothers. As immigrant mothers became more acculturated to U.S. society their feelings of confidence and competence came to resemble those of European American mothers [3].

Culture of Origin Acculturating Culture Culture of Destination

Japan	Japanese American	European American
Argentina/Brazil	Latin American	European American
South Korea	Korean American	European American

Design 2. Parenting in a Culture of Origin, an Acculturating Culture, and a Culture of Destination

In a three-culture comparison -- native South Koreans, Korean immigrants to the United States, and native European Americans—of two types of parenting cognitions—attributions and self-perceptions--Koreans differed from European Americans on almost all attributions and self-perceptions (even after controlling for potentially confounding variables, such as social desirability, and demographic factors, including age, education level, and socioeconomic status), and the differences were largely consistent with the distinct cultural values of South Korea and the United States. Some Korean immigrant parenting attributions resembled those of European American parents in the United States, whereas other parenting attributions and all self-perceptions resembled those of Korean parents in South Korea [7].