Family Factors: Immigrant Families and Intergenerational Considerations

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Abstract

This chapter emphasizes the importance of paying special attention to the family context for immigrant youth. Some key considerations for immigrant families, including separation and reunification, cultural and language brokering, acculturative gaps, and family conflict, are described. Case vignettes are used to illuminate these experiences, in order to bring empirical findings to life and reflect the kinds of circumstances which practitioners may encounter in their work with immigrant families.

Family Factors: Immigrant Families and Intergenerational Considerations

Family immigration histories are deeply woven into the fabric of American life, playing a central role in family and personal identities. In the USA, one in five US residents (e.g., 61.8 million individuals over age five) speaks a language other than

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English at home [1, p. 1]; these include both first- and second-generation immigrants. Moreover, these statistics are higher among school-aged youth (ages 5–17) residing in particular states, such as California (44 %), Texas (35 %), and New York (30 %) [1, p. 5]. In fact, projections suggest that by the year 2020, a third of children under the age of 18 residing in the USA will be the child of a first-generation immigrant [2]. Both first-generation immigrants and their children are impacted by the multiple and interacting factors uniquely related to their families' immigration histories.

Immigrant families, including those whose migration was propelled by economic or humanitarian reasons, are often driven by the promise and hope of a better future than the one offered in their home countries, especially for the next generation. Immigration is a rather complex undertaking that presents many challenges along the way for families. Exposure to adversities begins premigration and may include unstable employment/income, limited resources, lack of educational opportunities for the children, and political conflict or upheaval [3, 4]. As discussed in greater length elsewhere in this book [5, 6], the immigration process itself can present additional difficulties depending on the path immigrants take en route to a new country. These journeys may include a range of challenges including arduous border crossings, family separations, complex legal procedures, and victimization or violence by travelers or traffickers [3]. Once immigrant families enter the host country, the reception by and settlement in the community and neighborhoods to which they arrive present a new array of challenges, such as differences in culture, language, discrimination, and adversities such as exposure to poverty [3] and community violence [7].

Theoretical Framework

When considering immigrant youth specifically, bioecological theory argues that the experiences and opportunities afforded by interactions between immigrant youth and their families, peers, schools, and communities influence their future developmental trajectories [8]. An integrated model creates a more holistic framework by taking into account the interconnectedness among the ecological systems, risk, protection, and assets [9, 10]. An ecological transactional model focuses on interactions and transactions that impact development overtime through a reciprocal process of an individual shaping and being shaped by the various contexts in which he/she lives. Risk factors increase the likelihood of the onset or maintenance of a problem state or pathology [11, 12], while protective factors function as moderators, acting as a buffer to negative outcomes [13, 14]. Finally, assets or promotive factors, including internal and external strengths within an individual's social ecology, are those that directly lead to positive and healthy outcomes [14, 15]. All three types of factors exist within immigrants' social ecologies. Successful prevention and intervention efforts underscore and capitalize on strengths and resilience, in the context of the unique challenges faced by immigrant families [16]. An approach that integrates various ecologies allows practitioners and researchers to

gain a better understanding of the complex challenges, influences, and interactions of immigrant family dynamics.

The chapter provides an overarching look at these issues, covering the research findings to date related to the risk and protective factors for immigrant families defined in Table 1. However, clinicians are urged to follow multicultural guidelines for practice [17], to adequately take into account unique sociopolitical, historical, cultural, and other relevant issues that are more specific to particular clients' needs than the material provided here.

Families and Resettlement Stressors

Epidemiological mental health studies in the USA suggest that immigrants may have an advantage over their US-born counterparts. That is, immigrants seem to report lower rates of psychopathology compared to later US-born generations (e.g., [18, 19]). These differences have been observed in immigrant children; for example, in one study, using data from over 80,000 families participating in the National Survey of Children's Health, the prevalence of mental health conditions of immigrant children was about three times lower than Hispanic children from nonimmigrant families [20]. Some research has suggested that having immigrant parents may be a protective factor for children [21].

At the same time, some research has demonstrated that the mental health of immigrants deteriorates over time residing in the new host country (e.g., [22]). Although the research data on the mechanisms that explain this seeming decline in immigrant mental health are not conclusive, challenges posed by the immigration process have been shown to have a detrimental effect on the mental health of immigrant families. These challenges, described in further detail below, include acculturative stress, discrimination, exposure to violence, and trauma and may include fear and uncertainty related to their legal status in the host country.

Acculturative Stress

Immigrant families experience psychological strain resulting from acculturation processes to the new host environment in navigating and negotiating different cultures [6]; this experience has been termed acculturative stress [23]. Acculturative stressors include navigating a new setting where immigrant families may take a minority status for the first time, the challenges of gaining proficiency in a new language, lack of knowledge on how to access institutional resources (e.g., school, healthcare), and reestablishing social support, among others. Although there is evidence consistent with the expectation that acculturative stress should decline as immigrants adapt to the new culture and learn how to navigate it [22], it is not always the case. Acculturation can act as a sociocultural stressor in families when there is a gap between how quickly immigrant parents and their children acculturate [6]. Specifically, acculturative gaps can increase family conflict [24, 25] and

Table 1 Family-related risk and protective factors important to consider for immigrant families

	Definition/role
Risk factor	
Acculturative stress	Psychological strain resulting from stressors related to navigating a new environment including lack of knowledge about how to access resources (i.e., school, healthcare), learning a new language, and reestablishing social networks, among others
Acculturation gap	The nature and extent of the gap between the rate of acquisition of values and behaviors of the new culture between immigrant children and their parents. For some families, the acculturation gap can negatively impact to family dynamics and children's development
Acculturation-based conflict	Arguments rooted in cultural value differences between children and their parents. In contrast to everyday conflict, it tends to be viewed more negatively and can be a better predictor of adjustment for some families
Discrimination	Discrimination experiences based on children's/parents' immigration status and racial/ethnic background, among others. The impact of discrimination on immigrant families' mental health may depend on their individual cognitive appraisals. Intergenerational studies show that parents play a key role in their children's interpretation of and preparation for discrimination
Exposure to violence	Immigrant families can experience exposure to violence before, during, and post-migration. Parental mental health, including post-traumatic symptoms, is significantly related to children's vulnerabilities and psychosocial adjustment particularly among refugee and war-affected immigrants. Receiving communities where immigrant families resettle may also expose them to new forms of violence, which also negatively impacts youth's mental health
Legal status	Undocumented children and/or parents often live in fear of deportation; confront greater barriers to access health, financial, and health services; and are more likely to live in poverty
Family separation	The nature of the separation may determine its impact. Factors to consider are length of separation(s), whether children were separated from one or both parents, contact during separation, and quality and supportiveness of nonparent caretakers
Cultural/language brokering	Refers to the various activities that children do for their immigrant parents to facilitate adaptation to the new culture (i.e., translating documents, making health appointments, communicating with school officials, etc.)
Protective factor	
Parental socialization to culture of origin	Parents who engage in cultural/ethnic/racial socialization promote a sense of cultural/ethnic pride which, in turn, strengthens children's resilience
Family cohesion	Quality of family relationships, more so than family structure, is associated with positive youth outcomes (e.g., social skills, self-efficacy, self-esteem, etc.)
Family support	Social support from family, friends, neighborhoods, and communities play important roles in immigrant children's and parents' mental health

influence family dynamics and mental health [26]. Overall, acculturative stress has consistently been linked to decline in mental health among immigrant youth [27, 28] and adults [29, 30].

Discrimination

Immigrant parents and their children often also confront experiences of discrimination based on their immigration status and/or racial/ethnic background [31, 32]. One striking change faced by immigrants is the shift from being part of a cultural majority to a minority. These experiences may pose new challenges to the adaptation of immigrant families. For example, immigrant children recognize instances where they are discriminated by other peers and by adults [32, 33]. In addition, immigrant parents may experience discrimination looking for jobs or accessing services [34, 35]. There is evidence to suggest that the impact of these discriminatory experiences on the mental health of immigrant families is linked to the individual's interpretation of these events, suggesting that some may accept discrimination as part of the immigrant experience [31, 36]. Relatedly, a recent study of newcomer immigrant adolescents demonstrates that perceiving discrimination is linked to greater internalizing symptoms, depending on adolescents' appraisals. Those who appraised the discrimination event as more severe showed greater internalizing symptoms [37]. Intergenerational studies of discrimination further show that parents who perceive higher levels of discrimination have children who perceive higher levels [38]. Parents who perceive more discrimination may be driven to more actively engage in socialization practices that prepare their children to be aware of and cope with discrimination [39] and may be more likely to foster mistrust when parents perceive that they and their children were discriminated against [40]. Parental racial and cultural socialization can also play a protective role in the context of discrimination, providing children with knowledge about their heritage and racial history that serves to foster their self-esteem [41]. Taken together, evidence suggests that the impact of discrimination on the mental health of immigrant children and parents' roles are very significant and necessitate special attention in treatments and interventions [33, 36, 42, 43].

Violence Exposure

Exposure to trauma and violence before, during, and post-immigration is an important clinical consideration for immigrant families [5]. It is notable that communities and neighborhoods where immigrant families resettle may in fact expose them to new forms of violence [7, 44]. Studies suggest that general exposure to these experiences takes a toll on the mental health of immigrants, resulting most often in depression and post-traumatic stress disorder [44–47]. Emerging research in this area indicates that exposure to violence has a particularly pervasive negative impact on the psychopathology of immigrant youth, over and above experiencing acculturative stress [7].

Notably, although noted earlier that immigrant children may have some protections [20, 21], parent mental health can play a critical role in predicting child psychosocial adjustment in general [48] and specifically among refugee and war-affected immigrants [49]. A review of 100 studies found that parental post-traumatic stress symptoms are significantly related to child psychobiological vulnerability, including behavioral outcomes, internalizing symptoms, and hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal functioning [50]. More research is necessary to examine whether the timing of exposure to trauma and violence relative to immigration uniquely affects mental health.

Legal Status

Legal conditions of entry into the new country also have important implications to the mental health and well-being of immigrant families. Specifically, immigrant families who are undocumented face additional barriers to living in, and navigating, the host country. Undocumented children and parents frequently live in fear of deportation; have a difficult time accessing educational, financial, and health services; and are more likely to live in poverty [51, 52]. These significant challenges have a detrimental effect on stress and psychopathology of immigrant children and parents [29, 53]. Continued attention to these issues is needed to fully understand the unique challenges of these families and the implications of changing laws and policies.

Transnational Families: Separation and Reunification

For many immigrant families, the migration process is marked by temporary and sometimes long-term separation from family members [54, 55]. A common challenge played out over months, years, and even decades is for immigrant families to endure the separation and, subsequently, adjust to reunification. Separations can occur in various forms. In sequential migration, one parent migrates first, followed by the other parent and children [56, 57]. In another pattern both parents migrate to find work, leaving their children behind in the care of family members such as grandparents, aunts, or uncles. "Astronaut families" are those where one parent accompanies the child (usually the mother) while the other parent stays behind, and "parachute kids" refer to those who are sent to stay with relatives or friends of the family in the new country to attend high school while both parents stay behind [58, 59]. Some patterns relate to the age of the children. For example, among families who can sustain the financial burden and have hopes for remittance, older children are sometimes sent abroad to work or study. At younger ages, some immigrant families engage in reverse migration whereby children born to mothers in the USA are sent back to the homeland to be raised by relatives until they are old enough to go to school [60]. Finally, immigrant families face separation when undocumented parents are sent back to the homeland while children remain [29]. In all of these patterns, there is potential for the separation and reunification process to undermine family relationships and challenge the adjustment of family members [55, 57, 61].

Separation is painful and difficult for both parents and children. Compared to immigrant children who have not experienced separation, children who have experienced separation report higher anxiety and depressive symptoms [55, 62]. Children may feel abandoned and lose trust in the parent, ultimately damaging the parent-child relationship [63]. Longer separations lead to greater risk for children to feel less connected to and identify less with their parents, and ultimately, to experience diminished family cohesion [55, 57].

Importantly, long-term effects of separation are not clear. One longitudinal study found that after 5 years, anxiety and depression lessened so that there was no longer a difference between children who experienced separation versus those who did not [55]. A study of young adults, reflecting on their experiences of separation during the migration process as children, found that some deeply appreciate the sacrifices their parents made to create a better life for them. They were grateful for their parents' hard work and acknowledged the upheavals their parents had to go through in order to establish themselves in a new country and pave the way for their children [57]. Some of these grown children, however, did not recover from the separation. For these children, feelings of estrangement from their parents persisted. Research suggests that the effects of separation, at least in the short term, and for a minority in the long-term, are not positive.

After separation, families look forward to reunification. Reunification, however, is marked by conflicting emotions. Children and parents report mixed emotions, ranging from happiness to hurt, and often complicated by jealousy toward new siblings or ambivalence and distance in the parent-child relationship [62]. Children have had to deal with the initial loss of a parent and then the subsequent loss of the caretaker who they may have grown quite attached to while their parent was away. During reunification children may experience a sense of disconnected from the parent and feel like the parent is a stranger [61, 64]. Parents may have difficulty, especially with a long separation, gaining the trust of their children and reestablishing authority [64]. If parents are experiencing difficulties and stressors in post-migration adaptation and adjustment, the added responsibilities and pressures of parenting can be another challenge. While parents may view their separation as a necessary sacrifice for the betterment of the family, their children may not immediately appreciate or agree with their parents' decision [61, 65]. Another challenge during reunification is reintegrating into a family with new family members [61]. There may be new stepparents and stepsiblings. New immigrant youth may be resentful of the time that parents had with the new partner and siblings who may have been born while the child was left behind [55]. Children who experience less positive and more disruptive reunions may act out [66] and do more poorly in school [67, 68].

In sum, the emotional, psychological, and relational consequences associated with separation and reunion during the migration process depend on various factors: developmental period during which the separation occurred (e.g., infancy, toddlerhood, childhood, or adolescence), length of separation, whether children were separated from one or both parents, how much contact was maintained, reasons for migration, extent of acculturative stress experienced, and quality and supportiveness of the relationship with nonparent caretakers. At least in the short term,

separation and reunification are stressful disruptions for immigrant family relationships. Over time, although there is a wide range of variability in context and experience, most families do ultimately restabilize and are able to function [66]. Future research should focus on potential long-term effects and factors that predict more positive reunification experiences and subsequent adjustment.

Case Study

Elisa is a mother of two from El Salvador. Her husband migrated to the USA first, and his distance and lack of communication were ultimately connected to him having built a new relationship and family in the USA and, in essence, abandoning his family in El Salvador. Elisa subsequently migrated alone to improve the life of her children, ages 8 (Vanessa) and 11 (Mauricio), whom she left behind, to protect them from the uncertainty and difficulty of crossing the border into the USA. She sought out domestic work, and the act of sending remittances made the distress and pain of the separation from her children more bearable. However, her ability to find work has been unstable, so she is sometimes struggling to make ends meet and send her earnings back home. She is finally able to bring her son, Mauricio, to the USA after 1 year. He travels across the border with his uncle. Instead of bringing relief, Elisa feels more worried and overwhelmed because after such a long separation, Mauricio is angry and defiant, and she is unable to supervise him when she is working. She worries that he will get involved with local gang activity. Meanwhile, Elisa's absence in El Salvador is being felt more acutely by her remaining child, Vanessa, who continues to live with her ailing grandmother andhasbecome increasingly anxious and clingy, not wanting to be by herself at any time.

Cultural and Language Brokering

Cultural and language brokering refers to the activities that children do for their immigrant parents to facilitate adaption to the new culture. Children may translate documents; facilitate communication with doctors, businesses, and government agencies; file taxes; make medical- and health-related appointments; answer the telephone; and communicate with school officials [69, 70]. Children act as translators and advocates in helping their parents navigate through legal, medical, financial, and interpersonal issues and interactions [69], and this can include the therapeutic context.

One of the major questions related to the experience of cultural brokering is whether it is related to more positive or negative child development and family relations. On the one hand, cultural brokering could lead to parentification or role reversal—taking on adult responsibilities that may be premature and developmentally

inappropriate [71, 72]. Because of the linguistic and cognitive demands required, younger children may experience brokering as more stressful than older adolescents [73]. Another important clinical consideration for some immigrant families is the type and frequency of obligations placed on children which extend into areas that are complicated and consequential [69]. On the other hand, scholars have suggested that cultural brokering provides a sense of responsibility, where youth have the opportunity to view themselves as making valuable contribution to the family. In this view, cultural brokering is a normative aspect of the immigrant children's experience that does not lead to dysfunction [74, 75].

Thus far, empirical findings support both views. Some studies find that adolescents of immigrant families who engage in more cultural brokering also report greater family conflict and family stress [76–78], less self-esteem and self-efficacy [79], and greater internalizing and externalizing problems [69, 80]. Others find that adolescents perceive cultural brokering as a "primarily positive experience" [75, 81] and is related to greater perceived competence [82], stronger ethnic identity [83], and greater empathy and transcultural perspective-taking [84]. Attention to age of the child (e.g., is cultural brokering happening as a young child or during adolescence), brokering domain, and interactions with other factors such as parent support will be important for future research to clarify the impact of cultural brokering on psychosocial development for immigrant youth.

Case Study

The Chu family immigrated from Vietnam 5 years ago with their first two children, and their third child was born in the USA. The family's oldest daughter, Mai, is 12 years old and often plays the role of caretaker to her younger siblings and language broker for her parents. As a language broker, she frequently completes school forms and translates school letters for her parents. Most recently, her grades started falling and she appears to be sullen and withdrawn. These changes were precipitated by her mother's cancer diagnosis, for which Mai has had to attend multiple doctor's appointments. During these appointments she often participates by translating and interacting with medical staff to understand and explain her mother's physical health issues to the doctors and to her mother. Meanwhile, she tries to cope with her mother's diagnosis. Mai explains that she feels proud to be in a position to help her mother during this difficult time.

Acculturation Gaps

One of the most studied areas of immigrant families is the focus on parent-child differences in acculturation. Since children from immigrant families tend to acquire the values and behaviors of the new culture at a faster rate than their parents, a large difference in values and behaviors may result [85]. This parent-child acculturation

difference has been termed *the acculturation gap* [85], *acculturation dissonance* [86], and *acculturative family distancing* [87]. These scholars have proposed that greater acculturation gaps are detrimental to child development by changing the family dynamics in several ways. Parents' may lose their ability to guide their children in important areas of life, such as academics [4, 86]. Parents and children may develop dual frames of reference and, subsequently, feelings of alienation from one another [88], which may lead to greater family conflict [89].

Research on acculturation in general and on specific components (e.g., family obligation, autonomy expectation, and parental warmth and control) shows that the parent-child acculturation gap is related to parent-child conflict and child maladjustment (e.g., greater internalizing and externalizing symptoms, lower life satisfaction, and lower self-esteem) [89–91]. One study found that a gap in the heritage culture dimension was related to poorer adolescent adjustment, but a gap in the mainstream culture dimension was not [92]. A review of the acculturation gap literature suggests that the relation between acculturation gaps and adolescent adjustment is more complex than is usually presented, and the relations are not always consistent [93, 94]. Importantly, Telzer's [94] review suggests that the acculturation process and resulting acculturation gaps do not inevitably occur, and when they do occur, they do not necessarily lead to greater family conflict or child maladjustment. These findings are important for expanding our view of immigrant families beyond their roles in contexts defined solely by acculturation gaps and conflicts.

Even with the acculturation gap developing over time, immigrant parents remain a primary source of support for their children. Specifically, parents are often the channel through which an immigrant child can connect with society, maneuver a new culture, and remain connected to family cultural heritage [97]. Cultural and racial socializing practices can foster connection with cultural heritage (i.e., identity, belongingness, pride), reinforce their resilience when faced with discrimination and contribute to better adjustment in terms of self-esteem, mental health (e.g., depression) and school performance for immigrant youth [40, 95, 96, 98, 99, 100, 101].

Case Study

Abdi is a 15-year-old male whose parents immigrated from Somalia when he was a baby. Now, as a teenager, while his parents dress in traditional clothing, his manner and dress are more aligned with his American classmates in high school. His parents express frustration with his disobedience and concern that he is spending time with peers who are getting into trouble after school. Moreover, Abdi is failing most of his classes. Abdi's father works the graveyard shift as a security guard, and his mother feels isolated because she has little support and has had difficulty finding employment. She often cries, thinking about leaving her homeland and how far away she is from her extended family. Abdi feels that his parents do not understand him. He knows very little about his parents' immigration experience and the treacherous journey they faced escaping civil war.

Family Conflict

Two types of family conflict have been studied in immigrant families: minor, everyday conflict, and more serious, acculturation-based conflict. Everyday conflict, or "minor" arguments over issues such as household chores and schoolwork, has been studied primarily among European American families. The few studies including immigrant families of Mexican, Chinese, and Filipino heritage show that these adolescents engaged in similar types of everyday conflicts as their European American counterparts, such as household chores and schoolwork, at low to moderate levels [102–104]. Conflict over everyday issues is viewed as normative, temporary, and functional, as it realigns the parent-adolescent relationship [105] and facilitates the development of autonomy (or individuation) for youth of various cultural backgrounds [103, 106–108]. Further, it is argued that this realignment ultimately establishes a parent-adolescent relationship that is "less contentious, more egalitarian, and less volatile" [107, p. 88].

In addition to everyday conflict, acculturation-based conflict, or more "serious" arguments that are rooted in cultural value differences (i.e., acculturation gaps) between parents and children, has been studied primarily among Asian- and Latino-heritage families (both characterized as emphasizing family interdependence) and is viewed as a threat to relatedness with parents rather than the normative assertion of autonomy [71]. As noted earlier, acculturation gaps do not necessarily erupt into conflict [94]. But when they do, this conflict is associated with negative adjustment for adolescents [89–91]. Thus, in contrast to everyday conflict, acculturation-based conflict tends to be viewed more negatively and is rarely considered to be developmentally normative or adaptive [71, 85, 86]. Importantly, acculturation-based conflict has been found to be a better predictor of adjustment compared to everyday conflict for Chinese-heritage immigrant adolescents [109].

There is some evidence, however, that acculturation-based conflict in adolescence, similar to everyday conflict, may not have negative long-term consequences—at least for some families. For instance, one study found that acculturation-related conflicts were common among Korean American college students, particularly around challenges with communication, given a lack of fluency in a shared language, between parents and adolescents, as well as conflicts based around academic demands prioritized over all else [110]. However, Kang and colleagues [110] conclude that although relationships between parents and adolescents were often difficult, by emerging adulthood a majority of Korean Americans could reconcile their difficult relationships and come to a greater understanding and appreciation of their parents. They were able to consider their parents' perspective, empathize, and reinterpret conflicts with parents in a constructive way. They could see, for instance, the great sacrifice their parents endured so their children could have a better life. Future studies should examine how immigrant youth make meaning of family conflict as they get older and focus on implications for their current relationships with their parents and their long-term adjustment.

Case Study

The Mazdani family immigrated from Iran. The father is a doctor and the mother was a nurse in Iran but, since coming to the USA, has taken a position as an interpreter at the local hospital. Their daughter Anahita is enrolled in all Advanced Placement classes at her high school and is already planning for medical school. Over time, her anxiety has increased, and like her mother, she has started to have panic attacks and, subsequently, began limiting her after-school and social activities. Anahita and her mother spend almost all of their time together and are in constant everyday conflict about chores, schoolwork, and going out with friends, which her mother restricts. Anahita's mother regularly uses shame and the pressure to uphold family honor, to influence her daughter's choices. Mrs. Mazdani often tells Anahita how she lost everything she worked for when the family moved to the USA. Anahita feels the pressure to become a doctor, to honor her mother and father's sacrifices on her behalf. Anahita feels that despite her academic achievements, her grades are insufficient; she feels overwhelmed and constantly preoccupied with the stress of college applications and overwhelmed that she will let her family down if she is unable to achieve a level that is satisfactory to them.

Prevention and Intervention for Immigrant Families

There are a number of major challenges related to prevention and intervention for immigrant families. There are numerous potential barriers to service access, including acculturative, cultural, and linguistic barriers, and meeting everyone's, sometimes quite varying, needs. Acculturative gaps between parents and children may play a significant role. For example, therapy provided in the language of origin may be appropriate for parents but not for children who are not necessarily fluent in that language. Values and adherence to cultural norms may also be quite different for parents and children.

Bicultural Effectiveness Training (BET), a family intervention for Latino families, addresses the acculturative gap, blending structural family systems therapy with cultural considerations for families that reside in a multicultural context [111]. The BET intervention frames family conflict as a cultural conflict, offers a transcultural perspective, and encourages cross alliances by accepting biculturalism among different generations and cultures within the family context [112].

The Strengthening of Intergenerational/Intercultural Ties in Immigrant Families (SITIF) is geared toward immigrant parents of school-aged children [113]. This community-based intervention aims to promote greater awareness of potential intergenerational cultural misunderstandings and conflicts, increase parents' empathy for their children's cultural experiences, and teach parents specific parenting skills such as strategies for more effective parent-child communication. An initial pilot

study with Chinese immigrant parents showed that at the 3-month follow-up, this intervention led to a greater sense of parental control and more positive relationship with their children [114].

Falicov [115] suggests the importance of using four domains—migration, ecological context, family organization, and the family life cycle (MECA)—as a helpful tool for practitioners to understand the processes relevant to immigrant families. Attention to these domains can be important across socioecological levels, whereby schools and communities could also be targeted in family intervention efforts, in order to improve accessibility, engagement, and overall effectiveness in supporting immigrant families [116].

Case Study

The Wong family immigrated from southern China. Since coming to the USA, Mr. and Mrs. Wong attained jobs working in a restaurant. Their son Henry is enrolled in 5th grade and is having difficulty in school because of language barriers and challenges with making friends. In the past 6 months, Henry has had increased sadness and lost interest in his favorite hobbies and school. However, Henry does not tell his parents about his struggle. Instead he acts out and withdraws from all family communication. Mrs. Wong sees that her son is struggling with school and communication so she decides to follow her friend's advice to enroll in the 8-week Strengthening of Intergenerational/Intercultural Ties in Immigrant Families (SITIF) parenting class, taking her husband along with her.

During the first few sessions, the focus of the program was to develop awareness about themselves, their emotions, and about cross-cultural differences that may be uniquely experienced by each family member. The next several sessions were devoted to behavioral parenting skills training. Mr. and Mrs. Wong learned skills on how to be empathic toward Henry, with the goal of helping him to communicate better. They learned about creating structure, rules, limits, and a reward system for Henry. The session that followed focused on coping with stress, including the immigration-related stressors that the Wongs had endured. The final class was devoted to reviewing and integrating the material learned during the 8-week course. Mr. and Mrs. Wong reviewed what they had learned and reflected on how to apply their new skills in supporting Henry with his communication and school difficulties.

Family Strengths and Protective Factors

Current research on family strengths and protective factors offers a useful vantage point for detailing factors that support positive outcomes for immigrant families and their youth. The notion of resilience focuses on an individual's ability to adapt in the

context of adversity [117]. The study of resilience has expanded to include family, interpersonal, and sociocultural factors through frameworks such as the resiliency model [118] and a family resilience perspective [117, 119]. These perspectives offer valuable considerations for treatment of immigrant families. Specifically, the shift to viewing families as facing immigration-related stressors can frame struggles as a product of contextual factors rather than a result of a dysfunctional family. Moreover, strengths, resources, and protective factors can be incorporated into the conceptualization of a family's functioning, taking into consideration the ways in which the immigrant family system interacts with other ecological contexts they encounter [120]. Family belief systems, organizational patterns, and communication/problem-solving can play an important role in family resilience [117]. Meaning making can be an especially important task to help connect family members in facing challenges and adversities together and developing a family process of resilience [121].

It is important to consider the effects of both family structure and the quality of family relationships on child outcomes among immigrant populations. For example, in a large longitudinal study of immigrant youth ($n=2063$), family structure was found to be predictive of youth outcomes (e.g., educational performance, self-esteem, and depression), whereas the quality of family relationships (e.g., family cohesion and parent-child conflict) was found to be even stronger predictors of self-esteem and depression compared to family structure as a predictor [122]. Family cohesion serves as a protective factor for depression [123] and has been found to be associated with improvements in children's social skills (e.g., problem-solving and self-efficacy) [124]. Leidy and colleagues [124] suggest that "efforts to enhance positive parenting and effective family functioning must consider how best to help parents navigate acculturation gaps" (p. 11). They found that there are multiple factors that impact immigrant parents' ability to parent and foster family cohesion (e.g., acculturative differences, challenges to get involved in child's education, reduced access to extended family, and discrimination). When intervening with immigrant families, it is pertinent to explore how to empower parents to overcome these challenges that may impede their ability to facilitate protective family processes that will in turn promote family resilience.

Various family strengths have been identified for specific immigrant populations that should also be taken into consideration when intervening with clinical problems. Xia et al. [125] identified family strengths among new Chinese immigrants to include family support, social support, communication, and spiritual well-being. Among Japanese immigrant mothers and their adult daughters, family strengths of actively pursuing strategies to improve language acculturation challenges (i.e., receiving help, asking for clarification from parent, using humor, and aiding in improving mother's language) were found [126]. These simple yet innovative strategies could be beneficial in promoting enhanced communication among immigrant families who may be acculturating at different rates.

Another major source of strength for immigrant families is derived from social support. Ayón and Bou Ghosn Naddy [127] described family, friends, neighbors, and the community as the most substantial categories that emerged for sources of social support for Latino immigrant families in their focus groups. Interestingly, it is evident that immigrant families may seek strength and support from various

levels of their ecology as suggested in Bronfenbrenner's ecological model. Research suggests that social support has a protective effect on long-term immigrants' mental health outcomes [128]. In a large sample of Asian immigrants ($n = 1639$), the benefits of social support from relatives and friends were delineated such that social support partially mediated the relationship between acculturative stress and depressive symptoms; in other words, those who reported lower levels of acculturative stress reported higher social support and, in turn, experienced fewer depressive symptoms [30].

Taking into consideration the strong evidence of the protective effects of social support on immigrant outcomes, it is advisable to encourage opportunities for families to expand their networks of support to include various levels within the family context, schools, neighborhood, and larger community. However, practitioners who aim to encourage immigrant clients to build their social support network should understand the various barriers that may impede this process. In a study of Latina immigrants who reported changes in social isolation after moving to the USA, the following barriers to establishing social networks were identified: socioeconomic challenges (i.e., demanding jobs and relationship envy about employment), environmental barriers (i.e., space and transportation deficits), and psychosocial barriers (i.e., trust concerns and emotional strains [129]. Immigrant families may benefit from assistance in navigating these barriers to accessing social support networks. Researchers suggest incorporating opportunities for the construction of informal social supports where immigrant families can learn from one another [130].

Conclusion

Immigrant families confront unique hurdles before, during, and long after immigration. These challenges have a significant impact on the children and parents' mental health and well-being and consequently should be considered and integrated into the conceptualization and delivery of mental health interventions for this population. Understanding immigrant family strengths and resilience processes is crucial to inform interventions that help immigrants learn how to capitalize on factors that contribute to positive outcomes and adaptive coping to immigration stressors. Practitioners can benefit from applying a multisystem approach for interventions that considers the complexity of family strengths, functioning, and resilience in the face of adversity.

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