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How Does Migration Affect Mothers' and Fathers' Roles Within their Families? Reflections on some Recent Research

Michael E. Lamb · Lori D. Bougher

Abstract Collectively, the articles in this special issue reveal that immigration has diverse effects on individual family members that vary depending on their gender and age. Such findings underscore the need for intensive analysis and comparison on a number of levels—fathers versus mothers, sons versus daughters, parents versus children. This commentary highlights some of the findings that emphasise the centrality of gender in colouring the experience of immigration for different family members. Limitations of the findings are noted and suggestions are made for future research examining the effects of migration on families and family members.

Keywords Immigration · Parenting · Fatherhood · Migration · Family

Although ostensibly focused on parenting in a variety of immigrant groups, the articles in this special issue highlight the extent to which immigration has divergent effects on individual family members depending on their gender and age. Interestingly, furthermore, the apparent significance of these ascribed variables (gender and age) appears to dwarf the importance of either cultural background or characteristics of the receiving country. Unfortunately, the conclusiveness of this observation must be tempered by reflection on the limited

M. E. Lamb (✉) · L. D. Bougher
Department of Social and Developmental Psychology,
Faculty of Politics, Psychology, Sociology,
and International Studies, University of Cambridge,
Free School Lane,
Cambridge CB2 3RQ, UK
e-mail: mel37@cam.ac.uk

L. D. Bougher
e-mail: ldb30@cam.ac.uk

number of sending countries considered in this collection of essays (China, Cuba, Laos, Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Sudan, Turkey) and by the focus in all but one case on immigration to the United States (USA) or Canada.

Gender importantly conditions the roles and status initially occupied by adult immigrants in their countries of origin, especially in countries that have been affected least by the increasing focus in industrialised countries on equality of opportunity (e.g., Lamb 2004; Therborn 2004). Thus, for example, Sudanese refugee fathers living in Canada stressed the importance of their roles as providers (Este and Tachble 2009). In contrast, mothers were associated with caring and nurturing roles in most cultures. Qin (2009) reported that Chinese mothers, particularly those coming from rural areas, spent more time with their children pre-immigration than fathers did. In their study of both Chinese-mainland and Chinese-Canadian parents, Chuang and Su (2009) similarly found that the mothers had greater influence in the child-care domain than the fathers did. Likewise, Updegraff et al. (2009) found that Mexican-American mothers reported spending more time with their children, about whom they expressed greater warmth and acceptance than fathers did. Chuang and Su (2009), Cabrera et al. (2009), and Tamis-LeMonda et al. (2009) all observed that this distinction between maternal and paternal roles was established very early in the children's lives, with the quality of the relationship between the fathers and mothers molding dynamics even before the children were born, and prenatal involvement predicting postnatal involvement by immigrant fathers from Mexico and the Dominican Republic (Tamis-LeMonda et al. 2009).

The expectations that fathers are primarily responsible for the economic support of their families and mothers for childcare, housework, and emotional nurturance are often associated with gender-based differences outside of the

family in the types of work, status, and salaries available to paid workers (e.g., Lamb 2004). Contributors to this special issue reveal that these differences attain enhanced significance when fathers (as heads of households) immigrate from traditional cultures with their wives and children and encounter circumstances that challenge their previously respected positions in family hierarchies (Este and Tachble 2009; Qin 2009).

In many of the immigrant groups sampled here, immigration forces fathers to seek and accept employment that is of considerably lower status, and is often more poorly paid, than in their countries of origin. Indeed, the higher costs of living in the USA and Canada often make it necessary not only for fathers to work unusually long hours, perhaps at multiple manual jobs, but may also necessitate maternal employment as well. Together and separately, as Este and Tachble (2009) and Qin (2009) observe, these factors undermine the fathers' views of themselves as chief-breadwinners and heads of families, while simultaneously changing their wives' and children's perceptions of their status and success. The resultant shifts in family structure and dynamics, along with the associated stresses, can profoundly affect all the participants' adjustment, although these effects are not the focus of the contributors to this special issue. Nevertheless, several contributors provide evidence suggesting that fathers may feel the stresses of immigration more keenly than their partners do (Este and Tachble 2009; Qin 2009; and Updegraff et al. 2009 for fathers who are sole-earners of the family).

To the extent that racism and disrespect for foreign experiences and training is the cause of the fathers' unsatisfactory experiences in the workplace, as suggested by the Sudanese men studied by Este and Tachble (2009), it is unclear why women do not suffer comparably. Perhaps they had less prestigious occupations or were unemployed before moving, and so have less room to fall on the occupational hierarchy. Alternatively, immigrant males may face greater hostility than immigrant females (Güngör and Bornstein 2009), the centrality of breadwinning to men's self-identity may make the slights more painful, or men may be further handicapped by the slower pace of their acculturation.

While fathers are burdened physically by excessive work and demoralised by their changed status and family roles, their wives/mothers (Qin 2009) and children (Crockett et al. 2009; Lee et al. 2009) may engage better with receiving cultures and thus become familiar with it much more rapidly than the men. This can further reduce the men's status, making them feel alienated and disrespected by both society at large and their own families. A somewhat different dynamic can come into play when women assume substantial responsibility for supporting their families economically. Although men's participation in the family

and housework is not always changed by maternal employment, Pinto and Coltrane (2009) report that Mexican fathers in the USA became more involved when their wives made proportionally large financial contributions to family support. (Interestingly, the same was not true in the more affluent Anglo-American families in which fathers were more involved anyway.)

Although women can, of course, benefit in these cases from the enhanced status that flows from being the more culturally skilled adults, as well as the co-breadwinners, without having to give up their respected places as managers of the household, the cost may be overwork and overburden, as reported by Updegraff et al. (2009). Such role overload would presumably erase at least some of the increases in life satisfaction reported by women who began working after immigration (Qin 2009). In addition, maternal employment demands that women spend less time with their children, a sacrifice bemoaned by both the mothers and children interviewed by Qin (2009).

Immigration can also affect boys and girls differently, although the overall picture remains somewhat unclear both because the range of ages sampled here is quite spotty and because some researchers reported no gender differences at all. Both boys and girls may, of course, be empowered by the relative fall in the father's status and by their more rapid integration into a culture that proscribes forms of behaviour (e.g., power assertive disciplinary strategies) that would have enhanced the fathers' authority in the home country (Este and Tachble 2009). Güngör and Bornstein (2009) reported that Turkish adolescent girls adjusted to life in Belgium more rapidly than their male compatriots, but it is unclear whether this gender difference reflected the boys' aversion to the implied loss of status when moving from a patriarchal to a more egalitarian culture. Interestingly, those researchers also found that older adolescents regarded their heritage culture more positively and held more conservative values than younger adolescents did, introducing an age based differential on top of the gender gap in acculturation. Other gender differences in responses to migration were also reported. Adolescent Hmong girls now living in the USA were more neurotic (Lee et al. 2009), immigrant Cuban girls in the USA were more depressed (Crockett et al. 2009), and Turkish girls were more distressed than boys following their moves to Belgium (Güngör and Bornstein 2009). Additionally, East Asian girls living in the USA were less likely than boys to be influenced by their parents' values orientations (Koh et al. 2009), perhaps because East Asian parents find it a challenge to socialise daughters rebelling against traditional values. Family conflict in immigrant families may also affect boys and girls differently; in its presence, adolescent Hmong girls drank more while males performed better at college and smoked less (Lee et al. 2009). Of course, this may also

reflect differences in the specific types of family conflict involved. Updegraff et al. (2009) reported that father–adolescent conflict affected risk-taking by Mexican immigrant females more than males in one study whereas parental harshness was associated with classroom misbehaviour by adolescent boys of Mexican origin and maternal harshness with problematic peer relationships yet better school performance by girls in another study (Dumka et al. 2009). By contrast, Qin (2009) reported no salient gender differences in the reactions to immigration by Chinese boys and girls, suggesting that these patterns are not characteristic of all immigrants groups or at all points after migration. Koh et al. (2009) reported that East Asian immigrant mothers affected their adolescents' relationship identity whereas fathers affected their adolescents' identity in the achievement domain.

In her study of Chinese origin families in the USA, Qin (2009) observed a tendency on the part of immigrants to compare the 'here and now' with the 'there and then', and one wonders whether these comparisons affect the levels of stress experienced, especially by those men who appear to have suffered such substantial declines in esteem. To the extent that mothers also think wistfully about what they have left behind, both parents may seek compensation through their children's success, placing greater pressure on their children than experienced by peers who have not moved (Qin 2009). How this is perceived may vary depending on features of the home culture. Although the more-intrusive monitoring and strictness of Cuban mothers and fathers was viewed more negatively in the USA, the Cuban American daughters studied by Crockett et al. (2009) still viewed them positively as indices of caring.

Cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger 1957; Festinger and Carlsmith 1959) would suggest that immigrants initially over-estimate the gains associated with migration, but when the stresses associated with moving elicit misbehaviour or adaptation difficulties in the children, the absence of some traditional features of the sending country's values may be mourned. For example, Dumka et al. (2009) found that increased acculturation by the parents was associated with increased behavioural and peer problems on the part of the children, perhaps because acculturated parents de-emphasize certain conservative traditions such as family obligations and respect for authority. It would be interesting to know whether the association between parental acculturation and child behaviour problems is prompted by a shift from conservative to more egalitarian values or by a transition from familiar to less familiar values, regardless of their ideological content. The stabilizing effect of familiar values may become all the more prominent in families that have fewer resources to call upon during the post-immigration period of transition.

Overall, the studies described here provide snapshots of selected sub-groups of immigrant families, in which gender frequently qualifies and colours the nature of the experience.

Although the researchers all identified areas of stress and areas of change, there was also substantial variability in the findings, doubtless reflective of some shared limitations with respect to the specific sending and receiving cultures, the ages and social backgrounds of the immigrants themselves, and absence of insight into the dynamic processes that can be obtained only in more intensive longitudinal research. While unremarked by the authors themselves, it is also noteworthy that the mere process of migrating seemed more significant than where the participants came from or where they settled—surely this rather surprising finding is worthy of further research. Such research would necessarily involve comparative studies in which similar groups of migrants from different countries were followed over time as they adapted to different receiving countries. Unfortunately, such comparative research has yet to become a prominent feature of research on migration, and thus, in the main, the research literature, as reflected in the papers included in this special issue, is illustrative and provocative rather than conclusive. We hope that researchers will, in the future, raise their focus from local examples and begin exploring complex aspects of the processes of immigration.

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