



PCERII Funded Research

Progress Report

Stress of Immigrant Families with Adolescent Children Living in Areas without Ethnocultural Communities

Cynthia Baker

Université de Moncton

March 1999

Two critical periods have been associated with heightened stress among immigrants. The first is the year or two following resettlement when adaptation demands are highest. The second occurs when children in immigrant families reach adolescence. The support of an ethnocultural community has been found to mitigate the stress of the early critical period. Few studies have examined issues related to immigrant adaptation in areas without ethnocultural communities and little is known about how their absence influences the stress experienced during the second critical period.

New Brunswick receives immigrants from many parts of the world but few from any one region. As a result, its immigrant population tends to have limited contacts with other people from their country of origin. This study examined the nature and the management of adolescent-rearing stressors among immigrant parents who have settled in New Brunswick, a context where the support of an ethnocultural community is unavailable.

1. Research Questions

The study focused on immigrant parents from only two countries of origin, Vietnam and India. This decision was made in order to reduce the heterogeneity of the sample while at the same time providing some comparative data. The following research questions were investigated: 1) What are the adolescent-rearing stressors experienced by immigrant parents from India and from Vietnam who have settled in New Brunswick ? 2) How do immigrant parents from India and from Vietnam who have settled in New Brunswick manage adolescent-rearing stressors?

2. Methodology

The study used a qualitative approach and was guided by a constructivist perspective. Individual constructions were elicited from immigrant parents and were interpreted, compared, and contrasted. The final aim is to distil a consensus construction that is more informed and sophisticated than the predecessor construction.

3. Research Progress to Date

India and Vietnam were selected because census data suggested their numbers would be large enough to locate a sample of 25. In fact, immigrant parents from these countries who met the criteria of having adolescent children were less numerous than anticipated. Using snowball sampling methods, ten families with adolescent children from India and seventeen from Vietnam were identified. A parent from each of these families was interviewed. Two other eligible families (one from each country of origin) were located but refused to participate.

One research assistant, an immigrant from India, was responsible for locating and interviewing parents from India. Another, originally from Vietnam, recruited and interviewed parents from this country of origin. A flexible interview schedule and a socio-demographic questionnaire were developed for the study. A panel of three immigrant parents from India and another panel of three immigrant parents from Vietnam examined both instruments for cultural appropriateness before data collection began. The panels added several points to the interview schedule and made minor changes to the socio-demographic questionnaires. Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. Parents

from India were interviewed in English whereas parents from Vietnam were interviewed in Vietnamese. The latter were translated into French by the research assistant as this is her second language. The researcher speaks both English and French.

Two Masters students at the Université de Moncton, school of nursing participated in the analysis of the data as research assistants. This involved coding and memoing strategies to reduce and interpret data. As the analysis progressed, further interviews with members of the two immigrant communities were conducted in order to seek clarifications or additional information.

Preliminary analysis of the interviews has been completed. The last step is to return to the two panels of parents to discuss the analysis and to conduct additional interviews with members of the community to obtain a consensual construction.

4. Preliminary Analysis

Respondents' socio-economic status was relatively high. Most parents from India were professionals with either professional degrees or graduate level degrees. Although the socio-economic status of respondents from Vietnam was more heterogeneous, all had stable, long-term employment. Their educational level, however, varied considerably. Four had not finished high school whereas three had completed graduate level degrees. The remaining fell between these poles. All respondents from India described themselves as Hindus. Most Vietnamese parents identified themselves as Buddhist. One gave his religion as Confucianism and another as Catholicism. The majority were living in two-generation households with members limited to parents and children. A grandparent was living with five of the parents from Vietnam and with two from India. Three parents from Vietnam and one from India were married to non-immigrant Canadians. Two Vietnamese parents were divorced.

Major Adolescent-rearing Stressor

The major issue for respondents concerned values in the surrounding society related to individual liberty. Parents accorded a high priority to educational success and to professional employment. Individualism and freedom of choice were perceived to be potentially serious threats to their children attaining these. In contrast, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes and their children's appearance were not concerns for the parents interviewed.

Management Strategies

Parents from both countries of origin appeared to have responded to issues related to individual liberty by using a process of cultural sifting in which they actively compared their values and their customs with the values and customs of the local milieu, selected and committed themselves to what they considered to be fundamental or essential values from their countries of origin, and discarded what several specifically referred to as cultural details.

In order to transmit the fundamental values identified in this cultural sifting process, most parents from Vietnam had developed a strategy of cultural fencing to protect their perspectives from local influences. This involved creating family solidarity, encouraging

an ethic of mutual help among family members and maintaining a clear generational hierarchy. It also involved frequent parental warnings of the dangers associated with the individualism of the surrounding society, and parental structuring of their children's educational and occupational choices. These parents were optimistic about their children's development and future in spite of their concerns about local influences. In contrast, several Vietnamese respondents (married to non Vietnamese Canadians) adopted a strategy of cultural resignation rather than cultural fencing in which the influence of the individualism of the surrounding milieu on their children was accepted with regret and/or frustration. Although they wanted their children to adopt fundamental values associated with their culture of origin, they felt powerless to transmit these and so let their expectations drop.

Parents from India appeared to use a strategy of cultural synthesizing rather than cultural fencing to manage the influence of the surrounding milieu on their children. They encouraged their children to develop what several described as a blended identity. Cultural synthesizing involved the transmission of fundamental traditional values such as respect for elders while at the same time actively fostering the adoption of selected values or customs from the fabric of the surrounding society.

Most parents using cultural fencing and cultural synthesizing strategies felt they were succeeding in managing the influences emanating from the individualistic society around them. A contextual factor may have bolstered the effectiveness of these strategies. Respondents noted that their children are often the only member of a visible minority group in their class and many believed their children had faced some racism at school. Such isolating experiences may have brought children closer to their parents.

5. Policy Implications

Preliminary findings indicated that parents perceived the individualism from the social milieu to be a potential barrier to their children's ability to achieve economic integration into the society. Increased institutional awareness of strategies that may be used to limit the effect of this barrier may be helpful. The findings also point to the need to improve institutional responses to the racism experienced by children who belong to a visible minority in an area where the numbers in the group are small.

6. Graduate Students working on the Project

M.A students : École des sciences infirmières, Université de Moncton

1. Isabelle Tupin
2. Isabelle Doucet

7. Papers Presented at Professional Conferences

1. Stress of immigrant parents of adolescent children in areas lacking ethnocultural communities. Presented at : Atlantic Region Canadian Association of University Schools of Nursing, Annual Conference, April 23 1999.

2. Le stress vécu par des parents immigrants ayant des adolescents qui vivent dans un milieu où la communauté ethnoculturelle est inexistante. To be presented at : International Francophonie Conference in Health Sciences, Acadie-Sherbrooke, June, 1999.

8. Projected Completion Date

August 30, 1999.