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Research Proposal:

Social Support, Stress, and Adaptation in Immigrant Youth

Mary J. Levitt

Florida International University

*Note.* This is a sample proposal for DEP 4704: Advanced Lab in Developmental Psychology. It is adapted from a funded proposal, but has little resemblance to the actual proposal.

### Abstract

The proposed research is designed to address two major deficits in knowledge regarding the adaptation of immigrant students to the U.S. school environment, including a lack of information about the impact of immigration on students at different age levels and the absence of longitudinal data regarding post-migration adjustment. The focus of the study is on the emotional, behavioral, and academic adaptation of immigrant children and adolescents, in relation to their level of post-migration stress and the support provided by their social networks. Participants will be 600 newly immigrant elementary, middle, and high school students. Participating students will be interviewed shortly after school entry, with a second assessment two years later. Higher levels of stress and lower levels of social support following migration are expected to be associated with poorer adaptation. The proposed research will provide a much-needed window on the initial adaptation of immigrant children and adolescents.

### Research Proposal:

#### Social Support, Stress, and Adaptation in Immigrant Youth

The proposed study is designed to address two major deficits in knowledge regarding the adaptation of immigrant students to the U. S. school environment, including a lack of information about the impact of immigration on students at different age/grade levels and the absence of longitudinal data regarding postmigration adjustment (Coll & Magnuson, 1997; Hernandez & Charney, 1998). Researchers have identified a number of specific areas in need of study, including disruptions in social network relations, processes of acculturation, the effects of immigration-related stress on families, the socioeconomic background and receiving context of the immigrant family, and the effects of perceived prejudice and discrimination (Barr & Lacey, 1998; Fuligni, 1998a,b; Hernandez & Charney, 1998; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995).

Recent overviews of the literature suggest that most immigrant children adapt successfully (Fuligni, 1998a,b; Hernandez, 1999). However, Kao and Tienda (1995) found that immigrant adolescents had lower self-efficacy and were more alienated from peers than non-immigrants in a large national survey. Academically, immigrant students tend to outperform nonimmigrant students of the same cultural background (Fuligni, 1998a,b; Hernandez & Charney, 1998; Nord & Griffin, 1999; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995), but there is divergence across sociocultural boundaries. Latin American immigrants, for example, have not shown the same achievement advantage as other groups and are more likely to drop out of school (Fuligni, 1997; Kao & Tienda, 1995). Also, academic performance tends to deteriorate the longer students reside in the U.S. (Barr & Lacey, 1998; Fuligni, 1998b), as poor minority students in particular may assimilate to an urban underclass of peers antithetical to the educational

establishment (Zhou, 1997).

Potential antecedents of adjustment in immigrant students include family and peer values, language difficulties, socioeconomic status, family and school expectations, racial and ethnic prejudice, the child's age and temperament, stress related to immigration and loss of social relationships, conditions of migration, ethnic identification, acculturation, biculturalism and student-parent acculturation conflict (Barr & Lacey, 1998; Coll & Magnuson, 1997; Fisher, Jackson, & Villarruel, 1998; Fuligni, 1997; Gil & Vega, 1996; Hernandez & Charney, 1998; Rumbaut, 1997; Zhou, 1997). In general, however, researchers agree that the current data are insufficient and inconclusive.

The focus of the proposed study is on the emotional, behavioral, and academic adjustment of immigrant children and adolescents, in relation to their exposure to family stress and their availability of social support following migration. The hypothesis is that higher levels of family stress and lower levels of social support will be associated with poorer adjustment. Sources of postmigration stress to be examined in the study include general life stress, economic hardship, acculturation conflict, and perceived discrimination.

## Method

### *Sample*

The sample (N = 600) will consist of 200 children (100 boys; 100 girls) at each of three grade levels (3, 6, and 9). Participants will be selected randomly from among newly immigrated school entrants. Informed consent will be obtained from parents for all child and adolescent participants and the participants will sign assent forms. To ensure confidentiality, participant names will be removed from interviews prior to data entry, and the interviews will be identified only by a number code. Parents, school personnel, and all others involved in the project will be told that no information will be released about individual participants.

Letters of explanation and consent forms will be sent to parents or guardians of students meeting the initial criteria for participation based on school system records. Parents will return the forms by mail.

Participating students will receive an age-appropriate gift for their participation.

### *Procedure*

An initial interview will take place in the fall of the students' first year, with a follow-up interview two years later. Students will be interviewed individually at school in a private location. Interviewers will be matched to the child by cultural background and fluent in the child's home language. Interviewers will be assigned randomly, within cultural groups, to participants across grades, with the constraint that each interviewer will be responsible for an equivalent number of students by grade and gender. Teachers will provide ratings of school adaptation and psychological adjustment toward the end of each school year. Academic performance indicators will be obtained from school records at the end of each year.

### *Measures*

Most of the proposed measures have been employed in previous research and all of the measures have good psychometric properties. These measures will be translated into participants' languages and verified through back-translation by native speakers from the relevant cultural backgrounds.

*Social support.* Social support information will be obtained through the Children's Convoy Mapping Procedure (Levitt, Guacci-Franco, & Levitt, 1993). Respondents are asked to place persons closest and most important to them in the inner circle of a concentric circle diagram, with those less close, but still important in middle and outer circles. They are then asked to identify persons in the network who provide each of six support functions tapping the support domains specified in the convoy model (affective support, self-affirmation, and instrumental assistance). The sum of the support functions provided by all persons in the social network will be used in the proposed analyses.

*Stress, acculturation conflict, and perceived discrimination measures.* General family life stress will be measured with a checklist of stressful life events adapted from Johnson (1986). Acculturative conflict, and perceived discrimination will be measured with scales developed by Gil and Vega (1996).

*Adjustment measures.* Indices of emotional adjustment include the Children's Depression Inventory-Short Form (CDI-S) (Kovacs, 1985), and the Harter (1985) Self-Perception Profile. These scales have established reliability and validity and have been used extensively as indices of adjustment for school-age children.

Achievement will be assessed with grade reports and standardized achievement test scores, to be obtained for each student from centralized school records. Reading and math grades will be combined, as will reading and math test scores, to yield overall achievement measures.

Teachers will be asked to complete two behavioral adjustment measures for each student. These are the Teacher Report Form of the 112-item Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) (Edelbrock & Achenbach, 1984) and a 14-item School Adaptation Scale (Alexander, Entwistle, & Dauber, 1993).

#### Results: Proposed Data Analyses

Preliminary analyses will be performed to confirm scale reliability across immigrant groups and to ensure that characteristics of the measures do not violate statistical test assumptions. Additional analyses will assess the influence of demographic factors that are not the study's primary foci (parent education, marital status, etc.). Where necessary, these variables will be included as covariates or control variables in the analyses. As some attrition is expected between interviews, prior to data analysis, comparisons will be made of retained and non-retained children, to determine whether there are any systematic differences.

The hypothesis is that higher levels of family stress and lower levels of social support will be associated with poorer adjustment. Multiple regression analyses will be used to analyze the results. The

criteria for these analyses will be the Year 2 adjustment measures. Separate regression analyses will be performed for each adjustment index. Predictors will include student age and the Year 1 social support and stress measures. Additional terms will be entered into each analysis to test for interactions of the support and stress measures by age, to determine whether support or stress effects vary by the age of the participant.

#### Discussion: Potential Significance of the Findings

The proposed project will make significant contributions, both to a theoretical understanding of support processes as they impact educational outcomes, and to providing needed information to social and educational planners coping with large influxes of immigrant children and adolescents. When immigrant students enter U.S. schools for the first time, they encounter a novel environment that imposes immediate demands for adaptation. These students may have limited ability to communicate, sources of support that were available to them in their countries of origin have typically been left behind, and they may encounter prejudice and discrimination that they did not suffer prior to immigration. Their co-migrant family members are often struggling with a range of stressors that accompany immigration, including acculturation issues, lack of social and economic resources, discrimination, and legal problems.

The proposed research will afford an understanding of how students at different age/grade levels respond psychologically and academically to various aspects of their postmigration ecology. Most importantly, it will provide guidelines for identifying immigrant students who are at risk for maladaptive outcomes, including low achievement, school drop out, and emotional distress.

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