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Immigrants or Adolescents?

The Interplay of Development and Acculturation

By Peter F. Titzmann

Adolescent immigrants not only confront normative age-related psychological, social, and biological changes. They also face acculturation-related challenges related to their immigrant status. Disentangling these two sources of intra- and inter-individual variation has become a growing field of research on immigrants (Fuligni, 2001; Michel, Titzmann, & Silbereisen, 2012; Titzmann & Silbereisen, 2012). Knowing whether developmental outcomes are mainly driven by general processes, similar to those in the majority population, or by immigrant-specific mechanisms is vital for researchers seeking to develop preventions and interventions aimed at the needs of immigrant or ethnic groups.

The aim of this short overview is to present ideas about the link between normative development and immigration using the example of delinquent behavior in adolescence. I chose delinquency as a sample outcome because it can have far-reaching consequences, such as poorer school adjustment (Chung, Mulvey, & Steinberg, 2011) or more depressive symptoms (Wiesner, 2003). Furthermore, in the media and public debate, delinquency is often discussed in association with immigrant adolescents, who are often portrayed as being more disruptive and as having a higher risk for maladjustment in comparison with native adolescents. Of course, the scientific literature provides a much more differentiated picture, and certain immigrant groups (e.g., Asian immigrants in the United States) were found to be less disruptive than native adolescents (Greenman, 2011).

Nevertheless, research identified slightly elevated levels of delinquency among some immigrant groups in comparison with native adolescents. In Germany, for example, a higher share of Russian and Turkish immigrants reported having committed violent offenses (Rabold & Baier, 2011). The observation of ethnic differences in delinquency triggered research investigating the link between immigration and delinquency and the mechanisms for the development of delinquency among immigrant youth (Powell, Perreira, & Harris, 2010; Thom, 1997; Vazsonyi & Killias, 2001).

The current literature suggests at least three links between immigration situation and delinquency that offer an explanation for ethnic differences in levels and rates of delinquency. In the first link, ethnic differences in delinquency correspond to differences in the extent to which individuals from these



groups are exposed to risk factors for delinquency. One risk factor often discussed is socioeconomic standing, which could explain away ethnic differences in delinquency between immigrants and natives in Switzerland (e.g., Hüsler & Werlen, 2010). In other studies, the peer environment seemed to be the crucial factor and could fully explain why some immigrant groups were more likely to be drawn into delinquency (Raabe, Titzmann, & Silbereisen, 2008; Rabold & Baier, 2011).

According to Raabe et al. (2008), for example, immigrants were slightly more delinquent because they spent more time than natives in unstructured peer-oriented situations that are known to promote delinquency among migrants and natives alike. The reason for being in these peer-oriented leisure activities more often may be that access to structured activities is difficult to establish for immigrants due to lower language proficiency or discrimination. Thus, in some cases the same factors that explain delinquency within the majority population can also explain ethnic differences by taking into account that certain groups are more strongly exposed to these general risk factors. It needs to be mentioned, however, that such general risk factors often explain only a certain share of ethnic differences in delinquency (Schmitt-Rodermund & Silbereisen, 2008) and additional explanations are necessary.

A second link between immigration and delinquency can explain ethnic differences in delinquency even when the groups are not exposed differently to delinquency risk factors. Parental violence may, for example, occur in immigrant and native families



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at a similar rate but may only be related to higher delinquency in the immigrant group and not in the native group. A theoretical explanation for such differential effects is buffers that block the negative consequences of risk factors. Resources resulting from socioeconomic status (social contacts, money, or parental education) are examples of such buffers and were found to weaken the strength of association between a risk factor and the psychological functioning of adolescents (Degarmo & Martinez, 2006).

As resources are often distributed to the disadvantage of immigrants (e.g., Stoessel, Titzmann, & Silbereisen, 2011), higher levels of delinquency may be found among immigrants even though they are exposed to the same level of developmental risks, because immigrants have fewer protective factors. When tested, however, associations were found to be rather similar across ethnic groups (Raabe et al., 2008; Vazsonyi & Killias, 2001). Nevertheless, in a study of very recent adolescent immigrants some risk factors (e.g., family violence) were found to have a more pronounced effect on delinquency, and some protective factors (parental knowledge, school bonding) were not at all related to delinquency. This pattern of associations differed significantly from the pattern found among less recent immigrants (from the same ethnic group) and native German adolescents (Titzmann, Raabe, & Silbereisen, 2008).

A likely explanation is that stabilizing social systems (e.g., a social support network in the neighborhood) collapse due to the transition to a new country and need to be reestablished before they can exhibit a buffering effect (Granic & Patterson, 2006). Thus, although mechanisms leading into delinquency seem to be similar across ethnic groups, it is possible that under certain conditions (such as very recent immigration) a different predictive pattern is found, suggesting different preventive actions for newcomers.

The third theoretical link between migration and delinquency may be seen in the application of migration-specific models for the development of delinquency. In this direction, it is the immigration-specific stress or strain that is often discussed as an additional cause for delinquency among immigrants (Powell et al., 2010; Reich, 2003; Thomas, 2011). Such strain — usually assessed through experiences of daily hassles in various domains of life — evokes negative affective states and “pressure for corrective action, and delinquency is one possible response” (Agnew & White, 1992, p. 477). The most prominent acculturation-related hassles are perceived discrimination, the new language, and parent-adolescent conflict due to intergenerational differences in the adaptation to the new culture (Hernandez & Charney, 1998; Titzmann, Silbereisen, Mesch, & Schmitt-Rodermund, 2011). These acculturation-related hassles were shown to be able to predict interindividual differences in delinquency over and above known general risk factors among immigrants (Titzmann, Silbereisen, & Mesch, 2012).

Considering these three links between the immigrant situation and delinquency highlights the complex task of disentangling which mechanism is best applied to explain ethnic differences (not only for delinquency), because these links are not mutually exclusive. Unfortunately, the reality is even more complex. Cultural differences also exist (Bergeron & Schneider, 2005), and they may elevate or lower levels of delinquency and other developmental outcomes independent of the three links discussed here. Furthermore, the link that best explains ethnic differences may not only differ between immigrant groups, between receiving societies, and between cohorts of the same ethnic group, but also for different developmental outcomes. For immigrant delinquency, a preliminary conclusion can be that adolescent immigrants are, first of all, adolescents: When they face known risk factors for delinquency (e.g., delinquent peers, a disrupted home, spending too much time with peers without supervision), they are likely to show delinquent behavior just as native adolescents would do. However, some immigrant groups face such adversities more often than natives, which can elevate their risk for delinquency. In addition, immigrant adolescents can face additional risk factors related to their status of being an immigrant.

The example of delinquency used here shows that research on the interplay between normative developmental processes and immigration not only helps to explain ethnic differences, it also uncovers the underlying processes that can be applied to other (e.g., disadvantaged) groups. Furthermore, immigration may be seen as an example of a transition in adolescence. Thus, on a more general level, research on immigration can also provide information about how individuals deal with incisive transitions. Of course, further research is needed that compares not only different ethnic groups, but also individuals experiencing different transitions in different contexts. In addition, more longitudinal research is needed, as most of these processes are dynamic and involve age-normative as well as immigration-related changes. Such research can help disentangle cultural, migration-related, and normative developmental processes, a necessary step in understanding the challenges and opportunities confronting immigrant adolescents. •

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