

## CHAPTER 9

by Frosso Motti-Stefanidi

# WHO AMONG IMMIGRANT YOUTH DO WELL AND WHY?

# PUBLIC POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF RESEARCH INTO IMMIGRANT YOUTH ADAPTATION

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Editors: Michiel Matthes, Lea Pulkkinen, Christopher Clouder, Belinda Heys

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## ABSTRACT

The positive adaptation to and integration of immigrant and refugee youth into host societies is critical for their well-being as well as for the well-being and prosperity of society. However, often they face developmental, acculturative and social challenges, which may put their positive adaptation at risk. In addition, refugee youth have to deal with challenges linked to traumatic experiences before and during their forced migration, and after seeking asylum in the host country. In spite of these challenges after an initial period most immigrant and refugee youth adapt and do well in their new environment. The chapter addresses the question: “Who among immigrant youth do well and why?” Scientific evidence regarding the risks and resources for positive immigrant and refugee youth adaptation is presented and discussed. Public policy recommendations that aim to eliminate barriers to positive adaptation and to enhance young people’s social and personal capital are also formulated. Finally, a mission statement, supported by three major American and European scientific societies of Developmental Science, concerning immigrant youth positive adaptation, is presented. It summarizes the extant scientific evidence on the issue and proceeds to offer evidence-based recommendations for public policy makers.

**Keywords:** immigrant; refugee; youth; acculturation; adaptation; risk factors; protective factors; public policy

## INTRODUCTION

Migration is a defining feature of our era of globalization. A significant number of people have crossed international borders, often for economic reasons or to be reunited with family members and have settled in Western high-income countries. Currently, in Western countries international migrants account for at least 10 per cent of the total population (International Organization for Migration, 2016). However, in addition to economic immigrants, large numbers of refugees from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan have recently been entering Europe. They are fleeing war and atrocities and seeking refuge in European countries (UNHCR, 1951). According to the UN Refugee Agency, 31% of these refugees are children (United Nations, 2016).

The recent large influx of refugee families and children and the general increase in migration are contributing to the social, economic, and political transformation of Western societies. Nonetheless, it is important to the economic and political future of both host societies and immigrants, that the former treat the latter with fairness and dignity. Thus, the positive integration of immigrants in host societies is of paramount importance for the well-being of both immigrants and nonimmigrants, as well as for the prosperity of society. According to a 2012 report from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the defining test of how well immigrants have been integrated into a receiving society is to assess how well their children have adapted.

This chapter focuses on the positive adaptation of immigrant and refugee youth. It addresses the question: “Who among immigrant and refugee

youth do well, and why?” The chapter includes five sections. The first section examines different criteria for judging who among immigrant youth is well adapted. The second section presents a three-level conceptual model which places immigrant youth adaptation in developmental, acculturative and social contexts. The third section presents scientific evidence with regard to the different social forces that place immigrant youth positive adaptation at risk. The fourth section examines the role of the societal context and the young person’s immediate environment, as well as of influences at the individual level, in promoting the positive adaptation of immigrant and refugee youth. The final section presents a mission statement, supported by three major American and European scientific societies of Developmental Science, concerning immigrant youth positive adaptation, which summarizes key findings presented in the chapter and includes recommendations for public policy.

## HOW CAN WE JUDGE WHETHER IMMIGRANT YOUTH ARE WELL ADAPTED?

Key criteria for judging the quality of immigrant and refugee youth adaptation are how well they are doing with respect to developmental and acculturative tasks, as well as in terms of their psychological wellbeing and mental health (Motti-Stefanidi, Berry, Chrysoschoou, Sam, & Phinney, 2012; Motti-Stefanidi & Masten, 2017).

Like all young people, immigrant and refugee youth face normative developmental challenges (Motti-Stefanidi et al., 2012; Motti-Stefanidi & Masten, 2017). A key index for how well they are doing is their success in *age-salient developmental tasks*, such as doing well at school, having close friends/being accepted (and not rejected) by their peers, being aware of or obeying the laws of society, civic engagement, development of self-control and establishment of a cohesive, integrated and multifaceted sense of identity (Masten, 2014). Positive adaptation with respect to these developmental tasks does not mean that youth should exhibit “ideal” or “superb” effectiveness, but rather they should be “*doing adequately well*.” Adaptation with respect to developmental tasks is important because it forecasts future adaptive success.

Moreover, both immigrant and nonimmigrant youth also face the acculturative challenges that stem from living and growing up in the context of different cultures. They need to learn to understand, respect and live with people from other cultures (Sam & Berry, 2016), which requires that all youth, immigrant and nonimmigrant alike, develop *intercultural competence* (Council of Europe, 2016). Intercultural competence could be considered as a marker of positive adaptation in contemporary highly diverse societies.

Another important criterion for how well immigrant and refugee youth are doing is linked to the development of *cultural competence*. Cultural competence is an *acculturative task*, which involves the acquisition of the knowledge and skills of both ethnic and national cultures (Oppedal & Toppelberg, 2016). Culturally competent immigrants are able to communicate effectively in ethnic and national languages, have friends from both their own and other ethnic groups, know the values and practices of both groups, code-switch between languages and cultures as necessary, and also to make sense

of and bridge their different worlds. A related criterion for judging whether immigrant youth are well adapted concerns the development of strong and secure *ethnic and national identities*, which is another aspect of acculturation (Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001).

Finally, an additional marker for judging how well immigrant youth are doing concerns their *psychological wellbeing* (Motti-Stefanidi & Masten, 2017). The presence of self-esteem and life satisfaction and the absence of emotional symptoms, such as anxiety and depression, are common criteria of psychological wellbeing used by developmental and acculturation researchers (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006; Masten, 2014). The absence of serious psychological symptoms, such as those related to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), is also a key marker of positive adaptation of refugee youth who have been exposed before and during migration to highly traumatic experiences (e.g., Fazel, Reed, Panter-Brick, & Stein, 2012).

These markers of positive adaptation are closely linked, both concurrently and over time. The links between these markers is of particular interest for understanding why some immigrant youth succeed and do well whereas other youth have adaptation difficulties. The existing literature suggests that learning and maintaining both ethnic and national cultures, an acculturative task, is linked to better developmental outcomes and psychological wellbeing (Berry et al., 2006; Oppedal & Toppelberg, 2016). Along the same lines, in a meta-analysis of 83 studies Nguyen and Benet-Martinez (2013) found an overall positive association between biculturalism and adjustment.

## IMMIGRANT YOUTH ADAPTATION IN CONTEXT

Significant diversity has been observed in immigrant youth adaptation (Masten, Liebkind, & Hernandez, 2012). To explain who among immigrant youth is doing well and why, their adaptation needs to be examined in context. Since immigrant youth, like all youth, are developing individuals, to account for group and individual differences in their adaptation it is important to use a developmental lens and, thus, to examine adaptation in a developmental context. Thus, the normative socio-ecological contexts (e.g., family, school, neighborhood) in which their lives are embedded contribute to how well they adapt. However, immigrant youth also face unique contextual influences which are not faced by their non-immigrant classmates. Immigrant status and culture, and related social variables such as discrimination (Marks, Ejesi, McCullough, & Garcia Coll, 2015), are also expected to contribute to how well they do. Thus, their adaptation needs to be examined in developmental, acculturative and social contexts, taking into account multiple levels of context.

Motti-Stefanidi, Berry, Chrysoschoou, Sam, & Phinney (2012) proposed three levels of context to account for group and individual differences in immigrant youth adaptation:

- 1 *The societal level* is focused on variations in cultural beliefs, social representations, and ideologies, as well as variables that reflect power positions within society (e.g., social class, ethnicity) that have been shown to have an impact on immigrants' adaptation.

- 2 *The level of interaction* is focused on interactions that shape the individual life course of immigrants, and that take place in their proximal contexts. These contexts are divided into those representing the home culture (family, ethnic peers, ethnic group) and into those representing the host culture (school, native peers).
- 3 *The individual level* concerns individual differences in personality, cognition, and motivation. Immigrant youth's own individual attributes, including their personal agency, contribute to the quality of their adaptation.

Influences stemming from each of these levels of context might place at risk, or alternatively promote immigrant youth's positive adaptation. The next two sections examine risks and resources for immigrant youth positive adaptation stemming from these levels of context.

### WHICH SOCIAL FORCES PLACE IMMIGRANT YOUTH ADAPTATION AT RISK?

The first question that arises is whether immigrant status places immigrant youth adaptation at risk. A phenomenon, known as the "immigrant paradox", has been described (Garcia Coll & Marks, 2012). Immigrant youth adaptation is more positive than expected and, in some cases, better than the adaptation of their nonimmigrant peers (Berry et al., 2006), and first-generation immigrants are found to be better adapted than later generation immigrants (Garcia Coll & Marks, 2012), whose level of adaptation converges with that of their nonimmigrant peers. These results were not expected because first generation immigrant youth often experience higher-than-average social and economic disadvantage, are less acculturated and less competent in the national language, than later-generation immigrant youth.

A significant number of studies, mainly conducted in the USA and Canada, comparing first- with second -generation immigrants provide evidence in support of the immigrant paradox (see Garcia Coll & Marks, 2012). However, the immigrant paradox has not been widely documented in Europe. For example, a meta-analysis based on 51 studies conducted across the European continent revealed that being an immigrant was a risk factor for academic adjustment, externalizing and internalizing problems (Dimitrova, Chasiotis, & van de Vijver, 2016).

It should be noted that to address the question whether being an immigrant is a risk factor for adaptation, studies often compare the behavior and achievements of immigrant youth to that of their nonimmigrant peers. However, such comparisons have been denounced because they may lead to the conclusion that immigrant youth are inferior in some way. One could argue that whether one compares the behavior and achievement of immigrant youth to other immigrant youth or to their nonimmigrant peers may have to be differentiated according to the various forms of adaptation. Behaviors and achievements, such as academic achievement and positive conduct, that belong to the public (functional, utilitarian) domain (Arends-Toth & van de Vijver, 2006) and have consequences for immigrant youth's future adaptation in the receiving society, may be compared to those of their nonimmigrant

counterparts (Motti-Stefanidi & Masten, 2017). A different approach may need to be adopted when the focus is on private values related to linguistic and cultural activities, to religious expression, and to the domestic and interpersonal domains of the family.

Does being a refugee present similar challenges for youth compared to being an immigrant? Refugee youth need to address similar developmental and acculturative issues, as well as similar challenges related to their social status in the host society (e.g., discrimination), as do immigrant youth. However, unlike most immigrant youth, they face additional challenges linked to the adverse events that necessitated their flight from their country of origin (war, pain, death), the hardship endured during their perilous journey to their destination, and the complex, lengthy and uncertain legal immigration process after seeking asylum. Thus, they have to deal with developmental and acculturative challenges at the same time as dealing with significant trauma and insecurity.

Such negative cumulative experiences throughout the migratory process constitute significant risk factors, concurrently and over time, particularly for refugee youth's mental health and psychological wellbeing (Fazel, Reed, Panter-Brick, & Stein, 2012). Scientific evidence suggests that refugee youth often suffer from psychological distress in the form of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and other symptoms such as irritability, restlessness, sleep problems, somatic symptoms, and conduct disorders (e.g., Fazel et al., 2012).

Finally, immigrant and refugee status is associated with a host of social challenges. Both groups often have to deal with the challenges of adapting to a new culture in a context replete with prejudice and discrimination. Perceived discrimination has been shown to have deleterious consequences on immigrant youth's academic achievement, academic motivation and goals, perceived academic efficacy, academic persistence, and conduct, as well as psychological wellbeing and mental health (Marks et al., 2016; Vedder & Motti-Stefanidi, 2016).

## **WHICH SOCIAL AND PERSONAL RESOURCES PROMOTE POSITIVE IMMIGRANT YOUTH ADAPTATION?**

Scientific evidence indicates that immigrant and refugee youth positive adaptation is at risk. However, significant variability is also reported in the quality of their adaptation. Some youth show resilience whereas others do less well. Social and personal resources may make a difference as to who among them will do well in spite of the challenges.

Starting from societal influences, the acculturation ideology and the preferences of the receiving societies significantly contribute to immigrants' adaptation (Sam & Berry, 2016; van de Vijver, 2017). Societies that value cultural diversity and adopt a multicultural ideology promote young immigrants' and refugees' integration and positive adaptation. Furthermore, receiving societies, whose immigrant laws are more liberal and grant more rights to immigrants support them in learning the mainstream language and

culture, help them develop a sense of belonging to the larger society, and, thus, promote immigrants' (and their children's) wellbeing, as well as that of society (van de Vijver, 2017).

The effective and swift implementation of immigration, health-care, and educational and social policies is another distal contextual influence particularly on refugees' adaptation and integration into the host society (Fazel et al., 2012). However, the large influx of refugee youth into European countries during the past two years revealed a great unevenness between countries in their openness and preparedness to manage efficiently this challenging situation. A number of societal-level driven policies and practices have an impact on refugee youth's long-term adaptation and mental health. The speed of processing asylum requests, and the interim living conditions of refugee youth and their families may support or instead may hinder their current and long-term adaptation and mental health. Extant literature shows that post-migration conditions may actually have a more adverse effect on their adaptation and mental health than what they experienced either before or during their migration.

Distal-societal variables often have an impact on youth indirectly, by filtering through the contexts of youth's immediate environment (Motti-Stefanidi et al., 2012a). Two key proximal contexts that contribute to individual differences in immigrant and refugee youth adaptation are schools and families.

Schools are a key social context for immigrant and refugee youth. They contribute both to their development and their acculturation (Vedder & Motti-Stefanidi, 2016). The school climate, the educational programs adopted by the school, the quality of relationships in the school context, reflect to a large extent the attitudes of mainstream society towards the presence of immigrants and refugees in the country.

The educational programs implemented in schools may significantly contribute to immigrant and refugee youth adaptation. Programs that foster equality and inclusion and/or value cultural pluralism reflect an acknowledgement that schools are culturally diverse (Schachner, Noack, van de Vijver, & Eckstein, 2016). Both types of educational programs promote positive adaptation in immigrant and nonimmigrant youth.

Immigrant families are a key proximal context that contributes significantly to youth's adaptation. Immigrant parents need not only to enculturate their children to their home culture, but must also support them in getting along in the culture of the receiving society and in succeeding in society at large, and, furthermore, to help them to understand and teach them how to deal with issues of discrimination and prejudice (Hughes, Rodriguez, Smith, Johnson, Stevenson, & Spicer, 2006). Family values, which involve a sense of family cohesion, closeness and obligation, high parental aspirations for education, and an emphasis on education, have been shown to promote the positive adaptation of first-generation immigrant youth as compared to their later-generation counterparts (e.g., Garcia Coll & Marks, 2012; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008).

Even though contexts play a dominant role in immigrant youth adaptation, they are clearly not its sole determinant. Young immigrants are active agents in their own development and acculturation (Motti-Stefanidi et al., 2012). Take, for example, immigrant youth who score higher in self-efficacy beliefs and locus of control, which are central mechanisms of personal agency. Such scores have been shown to predict higher academic achievement and peer acceptance, and fewer emotional symptoms (anxiety and depression) (Motti-Stefanidi, 2014).

## PUBLIC POLICY IMPLICATIONS: A MISSION STATEMENT

A mission statement titled “Positive Development of Immigrant Youth: Why Bother?” was drafted in 2015 during an Experts’ meeting<sup>1</sup> that took place on the island of Hydra in Greece and was funded and organized by the American Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD), in collaboration with the European Association for Developmental Psychology (EADP) and the European Association for Research in Adolescence (EARA). The mission statement summarized scientific evidence regarding immigrant youth adaptation, and, based on this evidence, recommended policies and practices for host societies.

### The mission statement

“It is in the best interest of Europe and other receiving countries to have successful adaptations among their immigrant populations. The current refugee influx renders this a particularly timely and pressing issue. However, the successful adaptation of immigrants to new lands is also all the more important in light of increasing life expectancies and decreasing birth rates in receiving societies. As a result, for example, nonimmigrant senior citizens’ retirement pensions partly depend on the economic contribution of immigrants. In this context, immigrants are expected to become in the next decades an important force in the economies of receiving societies and also to contribute to the care and support of the aging nonimmigrant, as well as immigrant, populations (Hernandez, 2012). International research suggests that well-informed policies and practices are necessary for the successful incorporation of immigrants into new societies.

- Children’s positive adaptations and well being provide the foundation for healthy and productive adult lives (Motti-Stefanidi, Berry, Chrysoschoou, Sam, & Phinney, 2012; UNICEF, 2013). Investing in childcare, education, and health-related prevention and intervention programs comes with multiple economic and social returns, including more labor participation and reduction of crime (Heckman & Masterov, 2007; Lundberg & Wuerml, 2012). For some host societies without such programs, immigrant youths’ well-being and educational prospects may deteriorate as they age and acculturate to their new environments (Garcia Coll & Marks, 2012).
- Providing immigrant families with economic opportunities and reducing barriers to obtain adequate employment equips parents to raise well-adjusted and productive citizens (Stoessel, Titzmann, & Silbereisen, 2011). It has been shown that immigrants in many countries pay more in taxes over their life course than they receive from the social benefits (Dustmann & Frattini, 2013). Without economic opportunities, citizenship



- documentation, or a clear path to citizenship, children and families suffer in their health and well-being (Suarez-Orozco, Yoshikawa, Teranishi, & Suarez-Orozco, 2011).
- Policies toward immigrants are important for the successful adaptation of immigrant youth (Filindra, Blanding, & Garcia Coll, 2011). However, countries differ in their policies toward immigrants (Helbling, 2013; Huddleston, Niessen, Chaoimh, & White, 2011). Immigrant youth do better in countries with more integration oriented policies; assimilation policies can be counter-productive (Yagmur & Van de Vijver, 2012).
  - Immigrant youth adopting the host cultures and languages while also maintaining the heritage culture and language, do better and contribute more to society than youth who learn only one language or cultural orientation (Suarez-Orozco, Abo-Zena, & Marks, 2015; Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006; Nguyen & Benet-Martinez, 2013).
  - Discrimination, racism and exclusion have deleterious effects for positive youth development (Marks, Ejesi, McCullough, & Garcia Coll, 2015) and social cohesion, and are risk factors for radicalization (Pascoe & Richman, 2009; Schmitt, Branscombe, Postmes, & Garcia, 2014). In contrast, feelings of belonging and being accepted by the receiving society, strengthen youths' ties to the host society (Arends-Tóth & van de Vijver, 2006; Motti-Stefanidi, Pavlopoulos, Obradovic, & Masten, 2008).

Based on this scientific evidence the experts that drafted the mission statement recommended that policies and practices in receiving countries concerning immigrants should:

- Be informed by research and interventions that have been shown to have beneficial results.
- Promote non-segregated, welcoming environments and opportunities for intercultural communication and collaboration at all ages.
- Provide economic opportunities to ensure that immigrant families do well and contribute to the country.
- Provide early childcare, education, and health-related prevention and intervention programs to ensure that immigrant youth have the basis for successful integration.
- Create public campaigns that show the contribution of immigrants to the host countries as well as respect to the diversity and needs of various ethnic groups.
- Incorporate these considerations as part of choosing where to resettle refugees in addition to the availability of spaces."

## CONCLUSION

Who among immigrant and refugee youth do well, and why? The results highlighted in this chapter reveal a mixture of vulnerability and resilience in immigrant and refugee youth adaptation. It is important to stress the translational value of research into positive immigrant youth adaptation. Focusing on strengths and resilience among immigrant youth instead of on weaknesses and psychological symptoms has significant implications for policy and practice. Moreover, the focus on strengths and positive adaptation can contribute to changes in the public perceptions of immigrant youth,

boosting the recognition that immigrant youth have significant potential to contribute to the economic and social capital of the receiving societies.

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## BIOGRAPHY

Frosso Motti-Stefanidi is Professor of Psychology at the University of Athens, Greece. She received her B.A. (with distinction Summa Cum Laude), M.A. and PhD from the Institute of Child Development, University of Minnesota, USA. She is recipient of the Distinguished International Alumni Award from the College of Education and Human Development of the University of Minnesota.

She has served as Chair of the Department of Psychology, University of Athens, as President of the European Association for Developmental Psychology, and as President of the European Association of Personality Psychology. She is currently a member of the Governing Council of the Society for Research in Child Development, USA.

Dr Motti-Stefanidi's research has focused on the study of immigrant youth adaptation and well-being. Her main research question is "Who among immigrant youth succeeds and does well, and why?" She has conducted a large longitudinal study on the effect of the economic crisis in Greece on immigrant and nonimmigrant youth's adaptation and well-being. She is author of over 150 papers and chapters in journals and edited books in Greek and English, and of two books in Greek.

## ENDNOTE

- 1 Working group: Cynthia García Coll, *Carlos Albizu University, Puerto Rico*; Frosso Motti-Stefanidi, *National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece*; Brit Oppedal, *Norwegian Institute of Public Health, Norway*; Vassilis Pavlopoulos, *National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece*; Dagmar Strohmeier, *University of Applied Sciences of Upper Austria, Austria*; Fons van de Vijver, *Tilburg University, The Netherlands*