PERCEIVED DISCRIMINATION BY CHILDREN OF IMMIGRANT PARENTS: RESPONSES AND RESILIENCY

N. ARTHUR
A professor with a cross-appointment in Education, Nursing and Social Work, N. Arthur also holds a Canadian Research Chair in professional education.

A. CHAVES
A. Chaves is a Ph.D. student in the Faculty of Education and is the Calgary site coordinator for the National Canadian Child and Youth Study project.

D. ESTE
D. Este is a professor in the Faculty of Social Work and is the Associate Dean for Research.

J. FRIDERES
J. Frideres is a professor in Sociology and the holder of the Chair in Ethnic Studies.

N. HRYCAK
N. Hrycak is a professor in the Faculty of Nursing.

ABSTRACT

A pan-Canadian sample of children aged 11 to 13 who are children of immigrants was obtained to assess their adaptation to Canadian society. The results show that one third of the 1.5 and second generation children experienced acts of discrimination against them. The results also investigate the children's responses to these perceived acts. Finally an assessment of their resiliency was assessed to determine the short- and long-term impacts of these acts of discrimination on these children. Tentative findings suggest the children exhibit healthy resilience patterns.

The last 25 years have been referred to as the era of "immigration" due to the unprecedented number of individuals who are no longer living in their countries of birth. As Tsimbos (2006) points out, globalization, advances in technology, communication and transportation as well as the break-up of several countries – for example, the USSR and Yugoslavia – have forced or facilitated increasing numbers of people to emigrate in search of better living conditions and greater security. The number of people seeking academic and employment opportunities in other countries is rising in response to pressures to relocate and opportunities in the global labour market (Arthur and Pedersen 2008, Heet 2003). As such, we have witnessed dramatic changes in the number and structure of international migration while the number of countries involved in human mobility has been rising steadily (Demeny 2002). Our interest in this paper is focused on the experiences of the second generation (children, ages 10 to 13) of these immigrants. Although it is generally perceived that children adapt more quickly than adults, it should not be assumed that they do not experience adjustment issues in their everyday experiences (Arthur and Merali 2005). Specifically we will be looking at the level of perception of discrimination by these children and the forms it takes. We also will look at how these young people evaluated this experience as well as how they responded to the discriminatory events in their lives.

The ethnic context

Today, the percentage of foreign born in Canada is 20% of the total population, the largest proportion of foreign born in over 75 years. Moreover, over 13% of these immigrants are visible minorities. With immigration numbers averaging nearly a quarter of a million each year for the past decade, the number and proportion of immigrants in Canada continues to increase. The three groups targeted in this study (mainland China, Hong Kong, Filipino) make up nearly 5% of the Canadian population. Since 1980, nearly 800,000 Chinese (from mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Vietnam) have taken up residence in Canada making them the largest visible minority group (1.1 million, or 3.7% of the population). Likewise, Filipinos are recent immigrants to Canada and currently make up 1.1% of the population. Over the past decade, the number of immigrants from mainland China has increased from just over 18,000 to over 33,000 in 2006. Filipino immigration has also increased over the same time period from 10,000 to nearly 18,000. At the same time, the number of immigrants from Hong Kong has decreased from 22,000 to just over 1,400. Further comparison reveals that immigrants from mainland China ranked third in 1996 but have been number one since that time. Hong Kong Chinese ranked first in 1996 but today rank 22nd. Filipinos were ranked sixth in 1996 but ten years later were ranked third in the number of immigrants entering Canada.

The second generation

The second generation of immigrants will influence the course of Canadian society as we progress into the 21st century. For example, it is estimated that children of immigrants make up 20% of all children under the age of 18 (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2005). The integration of these

young people merits the attention of the federal government not only because they make up a sizeable component of Canadian society but also because they are highly impressionable and a positive experience early in life will increase the likelihood that they will become effective citizens in adulthood. At the same time, exclusion can lead to feelings of resentment and anger and create sub-ethnic enclaves that view mainstream society with hostility and distrust, which can be disruptive and unproductive. The diverse experiences of children of immigrants, whose identities can evolve dramatically as they grow up in Canada, play out within communities that are rapidly changing themselves (Melia 2004).

The process of integration begins with the different paths of second generation children as well as the institutions that represent the focal points of contact between them and the host society. The paths and adaptation of the second generation is very different from that of their immigrant parents. Moreover, past research does not offer much guidance for the understanding of contemporary events as conditions in the past are quite different from those confronting immigrant children today. For example, today's Canadians' view of integration is embodied in the belief that it is a way wherein individuals can maintain their culture and beliefs within respect for the legal system – but always with an emphasis on a shared set of values, in contrast to the view held a generation ago. We also know that the context that immigrants find upon arrival in Canada plays an important role in the course that their offspring's lives will follow.

Second generation children find that this is a time of conflicted identity in almost any context; as such, it takes on additional complexities for both immigrants and their children. As the new generation grows up, there is a greater awareness of both their minority culture and the wider dominant culture, neither of which is entirely their own (Melia 2004). For first generation parents, personal identity is linked more closely to the country of origin but the second generation has a more difficult time selecting a culture to internalize. Moreover, cultural plurality becomes a liability for immigrant youth when confronted with intolerance. Young people realize that to identify with another ethnicity not only risks making them perpetual "outsiders," but it may also bring prejudicial and discriminatory action upon them. How do young children of immigrant parents react to these events? They may be oblivious to these developments or they might develop chronic self-doubt. In the end, these young people will be forced to select their own identity but the external social environment will have a great impact on what that identity looks like and how they participate in the larger socioeconomic environment.

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One of the implications of the experiences of young children of immigrants can be placed within the debate on human capital formation and transfers or what is sometimes called the *brain drain*.[1] In short, will young second generation children with a good Canadian education be prepared to stay or to leave Canada as they get older and enter the labour market? This reflects a social, economic, cultural and political interest in what human capital will be lost or gained and will this be temporary or permanent (Balaz et al. 2004, Commission of the European Communities 2001). This process can influence both the composition as well as the dynamics of the host population – growth of the population, age-sex composition, and fertility and mortality rates, among several factors. As to whether or not this second generation will integrate or assimilate into the mainstream society or form a new urban underclass, the question remains unanswered (Farley and Alba 2002). However it is clear that children of immigrant parents face both short-term and longer-term adjustment issues in reaction to their environment; these have an important impact on their future pathways. This takes us to the question of resiliency, which will be addressed shortly.

Much of the existing research on second generation youth has focused on educational and linguistic outcomes (Harker 2001). Moreover, because second generation individuals are socialized and educated in the mainstream society, it might be expected that they would face fewer obstacles in their daily lives. However, recent data suggests this might not be the case. Abouguendia and Noels (2001) note that while the preferred outcome by second generation children is integration into Canadian society, there are barriers encountered by this cohort that impede such a move and lead to marginalization or separation. Others also have noted that the 1.5 generation is much like the second generation in that they have parallel experiences (Perlmann and Waldinger 1997, Kibria 2000). For the present study, we limit our empirical assessment to the 1.5 and second generation of our three targeted groups.

Our choice for the three groups identified for the purposes of this study lies in the fact that "race" is an ascribed attribute based on perceived physical characteristics and is an important dimension of all social encounters in Canada. When people meet for the first time, both "race" and sex are the first things we notice about people. The importance of this is that we utilize "race" and sex to provide us with clues about *who* a person is (Kibria 2000). As such, "race" operates as an involuntary sign over which the individual has little or no control. The control of this variable thus allows us to assess the impact of such a factor. At the same time, the study of Asian Canadians offers an opportunity to expand our understanding of the

dynamics of "race" and ethnic options. The category of "Asian" is powerfully marked and widely recognized to be an umbrella label, encompassing a variety of divergent national groups. On the other hand, specific national groups from Asia would find the idea of "Asian Canadian" to be of limited meaning and consider it a label that has been imposed upon them by mainstream society. Presently, Asian Canadians have been described as occupying a "middle" position in the "racial hierarchy" of Canada. Their pattern of income and education attainment, rate of intermarriage and social mobility suggests that "Asian Americans" enjoy some latitude in how they organize and express their ethnic identity. Our research will provide comment on this aspect of identity.

Resiliency

While a considerable amount of research has focused on generation one, on immigrants and their levels of psychological adjustment as well as on their integration into the economic and political structures of society, there is only a small body of work that addresses the experiences of their children (Gamburd 2000). Resiliency in visible minority children has not been systematically examined by social scientists. Our paper investigates this second aspect of the integration process – the resiliency of young second generation visible minorities.

The social context that visible minority immigrant children face as they enter Canadian society today is "colour," location and the absence of mobility structures. These young people experience discrimination and this seems primarily based on their visibility. Resiliency is the capacity to cope effectively with the internal stresses of their vulnerabilities (Miller 1999). It focuses on protective factors that enable an individual to adapt successfully to his or her environment. In short, it concerns itself with the ability to adapt to changes (Chaves 2005, McElwee 2007). For example, the existence of social networks may be a valued resource for young second generation children of immigrant parents as they cope with challenging experiences. In summary, resilience is manifested as the ability of young children to respond or perform positives in the face of adversity.

Methodology

The data utilized in this study were collected from six major urban centres across Canada during the 2001-2005 period through the New Canadian Children and Youth Study. The data collection involved four Metropolis Centres and over 50 scholars. This non-random sample used a snowball technique to identify immigrants who had lived in Canada less than ten years and who had children in the 11 to 13 age group. Both parents and children participated in a face-to-face interview lasting one to two hours. For this paper, three groups are compared: mainland Chinese (People's Republic of China), Hong Kong Chinese and Filipino children. A total of 1,050 young 1.5 and second generation young males and females in this age group were interviewed. Data was collected on a number of social and physical attributes of the individual. The present paper focuses on the measurement of perceived discrimination, the self-reported impact of such perceptions and the responses of the children to such experiences.

Results

Perceived discrimination

We begin our analysis by assessing the extent to which young visible minority, second generation youth experienced discrimination. Individuals were asked to identify whether or not they had experienced discrimination in the past year and, if so, to identify the nature of the discriminatory behaviour. Table 1 reveals the extent of perception and nature of discrimination. It shows that just under one third of the young respondents claimed they had experienced a discriminatory act directed toward them. The data also reveal that skin colour, nativity and linguistic accent were the most common elements upon which the discrimination experienced by these children was based. Children were also offered an opportunity to identify other activities that brought differential treatment by others toward them. Nearly half of the respondents identified other types of discriminatory action directed toward them. The results show that, overall, there is little systematic difference in the extent and type of perceived discrimination among the three groups.

Children's reaction to perceived discrimination

Those individuals claiming to have experienced a discriminatory action directed toward them were asked how they responded to it. A wide variety of response strategies were presented (see Table 2). While there are some differences in responses among the groups (e.g., verbally protested, tried to forget, avoided interaction, screamed/cried), the results show a notable consistency

Table 1
Level and nature of perceived discrimination experienced by youth (N=338)

	Percentage who said "yes"		
Reason for Discrimination	**Mainland Chinese (N=132)**	**Hong Kong Chinese (N=106)**	**Filipino (N=100)**
Colour of skin	22.7	26.4	26.0
Not born in Canada	22.0	26.4	17.5
Speak with an accent	10.6	7.5	16.5
Dress differently	6.8	4.7	8.2
Ethnic group affiliation	7.6	12.3	7.2
Religious affiliation	1.5	4.7	1.0
Media portray negative	9.1	11.3	10.3
Other	46.6	34.9	36.1

Table 2
Response by individual when experiencing perceived discrimination, in percentages (N=408)

Response taken	Mainland Chinese (N=163)	Hong Kong Chinese (N=120)	Filipino (N=125)
Talked to friend about it	61.1	70.0	71.8
Worked harder to be better	63.8	50.4	52.8
Defined offender as stupid	51.6	44.5	43.5
Talked to family about it	51.2	60.2	48.0
Experience wasn't that bad	54.3	55.2	62.8
Took it as fact of life	46.3	52.1	53.2
Ignored the situation	47.2	37.8	44.2
Verbally protested	38.0	29.1	19.5
Tried to forget	37.3	49.2	65.3
Reasoned with person	31.5	34.5	41.6
Reported incident to authority	29.6	31.7	28.6
Protected myself	28.0	22.2	39.0
Didn't react or do anything	28.2	32.8	32.0
Returned the same back	28.2	15.8	22.4
Pretend not offended	21.7	27.7	31.5
Avoided interaction	8.1	11.0	17.9
Screamed or cried	6.8	12.6	15.2
Physically attacked offender	11.7	7.5	5.6
Joined a gang	3.1	4.2	4.0
Joined a protest group	2.5	4.3	7.3
Went to media	1.8	3.4	1.7

among the groups with regard to how they responded to the perceived discrimination. Moreover, the types of responses reveal simultaneously decreasing frequency among the groups: most talked to their friends about it, few went to the media.[2]

Importance of event

When the children acknowledged that they had experienced a discriminatory act, they were asked how important this experience was for them compared to other things that were important to them. The data shown in Table 3 reveals the importance given to such an event. A surprising number claimed that is was not at all important. However, nearly half of the children noted that the experience was somewhat/not very important to them, although Filipino children were less likely to view the event in such a manner. Filipino children seemed to be more impacted by the event as nearly one third of the Filipino children felt the event was the "most" or a "very important" event in their lives, while fewer indicated that it did not impact them at all.

These results show that while young people understand discrimination has meaning, they tend to deal with it relative to the importance it has in their lives. However, it is worth noting that there are differences among the three groups.

Nature of being upset

Children also were asked to indicate how much the experience bothered or upset them. The results show consistency among the three groups. Over three-quarters of the respondents noted that the experience was not upsetting or was only a little upsetting, while the remainder felt it upset them a lot or was extremely upsetting. We then probed and asked these children how it upset them and they provided the following responses (see Table 4). A sizeable proportion felt sad, depressed, helpless, discouraged, angry and ready to strike out at the offender. The results from Table 1 confirm this feeling and in some cases confirm that the child actually engaged in physical violence. However, the results also demonstrate that the impact on self-esteem, self-identity or family identity seems to be minimal and did not negatively impact the individuals' identity.

Children were then asked about how long they were upset. Fewer than 70% of all three groups felt that they were upset for a few minutes to a few hours, and then the feeling diminished. However, between 15% and 19% of the three groups claimed they were upset for a few days to a few weeks.

Table 3
Student self-evaluation of importance of experiencing discrimination, in percentages (N=338)

	Most/very important	Somewhat/not very	Not at all
Mainland Chinese	15.6	51.1	33.3
Hong Kong Chinese	19.2	51.3	29.6
Filipino	32.1	46.3	22.6

Table 4
Ways in which child was upset by experiencing discrimination, in percentages (N=365)

	Mainland Chinese (N=144)	Hong Kong Chinese (N=115)	Filipino (N=106)
Feeling scared/terrified	2.8	2.6	4.7
Feeling weak/confused	5.6	7.0	11.3
Feeling sad/depressed	17.4	28.7	25.5
Feeling helpless/discouraged	18.1	8.7	11.3
Feeling angry/strike out	13.9	13.0	13.2
Feeling ashamed of self/family	0.7	7.8	3.8

Table 5
Impact of Experiencing Discrimination (N=402)

	Disagree/strongly disagree			Agree/strongly agree		
	Mainland Chinese	Hong Kong Chinese	Filipino	Mainland Chinese	Hong Kong Chinese	Filipino
More attached to my culture	41.4	49.6	41.3	58.6	50.4	58.7
More mature person	42.3	30.8	25.0	57.7	69.2	75.0
Made me turn against Canada	68.7	88.2	87.0	31.3	11.8	13.0
Wish I wasn't a member of ethnic	65.1	85.3	91.5	34.9	14.7	8.5

Surprisingly, about 12% of the respondents noted that they still were upset about the incident at the time of the interview, which ranged from six months to three years after the fact.

Impact of experience

Children were asked to assess the lasting impact of the incident. Table 5 identifies specific ways in which children felt that the incident impacted them. The results show that the event strengthened the children's attachment to their culture and made them, in their eyes, more mature. Other impacts varied among children in the ethnic groups. For example, while most children did not see the event as "turning them against Canada," nearly one third of the mainland Chinese children expressed such an attitude. In addition, over one third of the mainland Chinese children claimed that the experience made them wish they were not a member of their ethnic group.

Conclusion

The extent to which children perceive discrimination impacts their propensity to develop positive self identities, integrate into Canadian society and lay the foundation for the next generation. Our results show that discrimination continues to be a reality in the lives of 1.5 and second generation children. Moreover, we found that the impact of such an event varied. In addition, we found that children have many different responses to such an act. Children may respond to acts of discrimination in both "healthy" and "unhealthy" ways. In the former, resilience is expressed through prosocial, adaptive actions while unhealthy resilience is seen in the use of aggressive or self-destructive behaviours. Our results show that children use both types of resilience techniques, which culminate in very different outcomes for the child. As revealed, a number of children attacked their perpetrator, either physically or verbally. At the same time, we found that healthy resilience techniques were much more likely to be employed. For example, our results show that children understand the importance of networks of friends, relatives and acquaintances in dealing with potentially traumatic events and have drawn upon their social support networks to deal with the experience. High on their responses were talking to a friend or family member about it, working harder to be better and considering the experience as not being too bad.

Our research shows that markers of "Asian" are pervasive and encompass a variety of ethnocultural groups. As such, those specific groups with such a marker reveal similar experiences with regard to perception of discrimination. In addition, the concentration of second generation children in large metropolitan areas adds to their vulnerability by subjecting them to counter-cultures that block upward mobility. These children find themselves in a "knowledge economy" that requires extensive education and provides networks that allow them to engage in upward mobility. Their parents had not previously been part of the existing networks; thus, second generation children are disadvantaged. As such, entrance into the existing labour market may be limited to labour intensive industries (on the decline) or personal services, neither of which offers good channels for upward mobility. Finally, these children experience discrimination that adds to their vulnerability.

However, it would seem that second generation immigrant children are using education as an avenue of upward mobility and developing social networks. They have also developed strategies for blunting the impact of discriminatory acts directed toward them. For example, they have chosen to downplay the importance of these events and, in so doing, have opted to retain their cultural heritage and are thereby able to participate in both mainstream society as well as their own ethnic community (bi-cultural integration). This resiliency of young 1.5 and second generation visible minority children allows them to turn adversity and crises into opportunities for growth. These protective components reduce risks, promote self-esteem and enhance positive relationships with both their ethnic community as well as mainstream society.

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Notes

[1] Others refer to this distribution as "brain gain," "brain waste," "brain circulation," "brain overflow," "brain distribution" or "brain redistribution."

[2] It is important to note that more children identified a "response" to perceived discrimination than claimed they were discriminated against (see the number of cases in Tables 1 and 2). Follow-up interviews revealed that while some children were unwilling to admit they had experienced discrimination, they were prepared to comment on how they dealt with it. The results further confirm that young people have developed a series of strategies to deal with the perceived experience of discriminatory action.

