PARENTS AND TEENS IN IMMIGRANT FAMILIES

Cultural Influences and Material Pressures

ABSTRACT

Immigrant families are often depicted as battlegrounds between first generation parents and second generation children. Interviews with immigrant teens reveal a more complex picture of conflict, consensus, continuity and change in intergenerational relationships in immigrant families, as well as variation based on gender, cohort, family type and conditions of immigration.

VAPPU TYYSKÄ

Dr. Vappu Tyyskä is Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology at Ryerson University, where she also teaches in the M.A. Program in Immigration and Settlement Studies. Her research deals with intergenerational relations and interpersonal family violence in selected immigrant communities.

There is no question that parents face shifts in their roles and relationships with their children upon immigration and settlement (Kilbride et al. 2001, Tyyskä 2003a, 2005 and 2006). Many immigrant parents report feeling that their parenting ability is under serious stress in a number of ways (Tyyskä 2005 and 2006). One of the major stresses comes from living under economic duress, a particularly well documented fact of life among racialized immigrants (Liu and Kerr 2003). Poverty alone creates situational and systemic obstacles that undermine attentive and nurturing parental behaviours. While many immigrant parents struggle with unemployment, underemployment, multiple job holding and shifts in gender-based economic and domestic roles, their children may not get the attention they deserve. In order to avoid being trapped in poverty, many immigrant parents also put added pressures on their offspring in the areas of education and future employment (Creese et al. 1999, Beiser et al. 2000, Tyyskä 2005 and 2006).

Parental authority over children may be challenged: changing maternal and paternal work and family roles may alter customary family relationships both between parents and with children. It is common for male immigrants to undergo a loss in their work status, which they also experience as a loss of their status as head of the household. At the same time, immigrant women in some communities are compelled to seek gainful employment, which may give them added status in the family (Ali and Kilbride 2004, Anisef et al. 2001, Creese et al. 1999, Grewal et al. 2005, Tyyskä 2005). In the extreme, the resulting tensions can contribute to an onset of, or an increase in severity of, family violence against women and children (Creese et al. 1999: 8, Tyyskä 2005, Wiebe 1991).

Other pressures on intergeneration relations in immigrant families emerge from the faster cultural adjustment of children, as compared to their parents. Children often learn the official language faster than their parents due to the influence of schools and peers. This can lead to two types of intergenerational problems. First, language differences can create conflict in intergenerational communication and transmission of culture and identity (Anisef et al. 2001, Bernhard et al. 1996). Second, role reversals and shifts in parental authority may arise, as parents rely on their children as mediators/translators in their dealings with social institutions (schools, hospitals, social services) and the host society's culture (Ali and Kilbride 2004, Creese et al. 1999, Momirov and Kilbride 2005, Tyyskä et al. 2005 and 2006). Thus, while immigrant children may claim new roles and responsibilities in their families during the settlement process, many parents expect to retain the customary degree of authority over the children, a situation that results in family tensions (Creese et al. 1999).

Given these often dramatic shifts, it is not surprising that much of the research into intergenerational relations in immigrant families tends to focus on intergenerational conflict ("the generation gap") in terms of the contrary expectations of "old world" parents and their "new world" children (Tyyskä 2005 and 2006). Immigrant parents tend to report concern over issues such as peer relations and social behaviour (Wong 1999, Wade and Brannigan 1998), dating and spouse selection patterns (Dhruvarajan 2003, Mitchell 2001, Morrison et al. 1999, Zaidi and Shuraydi 2002), educational and career choices (Dhruvarajan 2003, Li 1988, Noivo 1993) and retention of culture (James 1999).

For their part, many immigrant youth feel torn between their desire to fit in with their peers and their desire to meet their parents' expectations (Tyyskä 2003b and 2006). Particularly stark differences emerge in some immigrant communities with regard to parental expectations of male and female

children. Adolescent girls in some immigrant families have much less freedom of movement and decision making power than their brothers (Anisef and Kilbride 2000, Anisef et al. 2001, Tyyskä 2001, 2003b and 2006). Parental fears for daughters relate predominantly to dating – which is equated with premarital sexuality – while fears for sons centre on drugs and violence (Anisef et al. 2001, Tyyskä 2006).

Complexities in family relationships: Views of Iranian and Tamil teens

Conflict between immigrant parents and their children is by no means inevitable. My research into adolescent-parent relationships in the Toronto Iranian community (Tyyskä 2003) suggests that there is a complex pattern of gendered intergenerational relationships. I examined patterns of both conflict and cohesion in parent-teen relationships. Interviews with 16 teenaged Iranian-Canadians uncovered a continuum of parent-adolescent relationships from traditional to non-traditional in the Iranian immigrant community. Some families are distinctly traditional: family relationships are hierarchical in terms of both gender and age. There are distinct parental expectations from boys and girls. Young people, and particularly young women, have little influence in the family communication and decision-making process. In contrast, in non-traditional families gender relations are less hierarchical and there is more open communication and more input by young people in family matters. Youth in the non-traditional Iranian families reported fewer intergenerational problems than those in the traditional families. Most notably, nearly all of the teenaged respondents reported changes in their parents' approach to parenting and intergenerational relationships, through increasing flexibility and openness during the immigration and settlement period. Many youth reported that their parents were willing to make changes that resulted in an increase in harmony between the generations. Furthermore, the teens expressed appreciation for their parents' efforts.

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Many similar themes arise from the replication of the above study through interviews of 20 Sri Lankan Tamil youth in Toronto (Tyyskä 2006), to be summarized below. However, significant distinctions also emerge, pointing to the need for a careful analysis of intergenerational behaviour patterns. To begin with, the Tamil study uncovered richer details regarding patterns of continuity and change in intergenerational relationships in immigrant families. Literature on Tamil families in Sri Lanka reveals a traditional pattern of family life with parental control over children and an expectation of obedience and family loyalty, within an extended family framework (Kendall 1989: 13). Children owe their parents financial support in times of need and during the parents' old age (Sivarajah 1998: 12-13). These expectations produce tensions after immigration. Areas of disagreement between Tamil immigrant parents and their children include those listed for immigrant families in general, including parental stress on education (Kendall 1989: 7, Kandasamy 1995 19, Tyyskä and Colavecchia 2001: 12-31, 98-113), children's better English language skills and cultural norms and expectations. The latter refers specifically to marrying within the caste and retention of Tamil dialects. Intergenerational relations are further stressed by long separations between children and their fathers who often arrive first, spend years apart from their families and find themselves so burdened by paid work (dual jobs are common) that repairing family bonds is difficult after reunification (Kandasamy 1995: 18-20).

In keeping with other studies, particularly among South Asian immigrants, there is reportedly more control over young Tamil girls' lives than those of their brothers. There is particular concern over the safety and good reputation of girls (Kandasamy 1995: 17-18, Handa 1997: 253-274), exemplified in one Tamil father's description of his daughter as the "flag bearer of our culture" (Tyyskä and Colavecchia 2001: 20) who needs to uphold family reputation by being chaste, dressing appropriately and participating in cultural customs. This pattern was confirmed in my interviews of Sri Lankan Tamil youth (Tyyskä 2006).

In addition to the richer details about the more uniformly traditional family life among Tamils, compared to Iranian immigrants, the results also suggest that there is a cohort difference among youth. The first generation youth (and also those in the so-called "one-and-a-half" generation) who were born outside of Canada and had a chance to experience family life in Sri Lanka reported fewer problems with their parents, compared with youth who were born in Canada. The results seem to suggest that there is an increase in conflict between the generations over time as children get drawn into the host culture through peers and other social influences. However, it may also mean that youth who share the first generation immigrant experience with their parents may continue to uphold the more traditional values even as they grow up. The outcome would be that, in the absence of changes in parental values, there is more harmony in these relationships than in those between first generation immigrant parents and their second generation (Canadian-born) children (Tyyskä 2006).

Pushing the boundaries: Taking on "culture"

In order to better understand the balance of conflict and consensus in immigrant families, we need to return to the previously made point about the need to expand the scope of intergenerational values and activities in immigrant families. Aside from the frequently noted parental pressures toward their children's education as a pathway to good careers and financial security, the bulk of the literature on immigrant youth-parent relations dwells on the realm of values and cultural expectations,

including familism and observance of cultural values, which includes religion. As valuable as this focus is, it may actually be responsible for the stereotypical perception of immigrant families as battlefields between the generations. As already noted, immigrant families are far from being uniform and even further from being conflict-ridden and problematic. This gets confirmation from both Iranian and Tamil youth who reported generally positive relationships with their parents, regardless of reports of specific problem areas (Tyyskä 2003b and 2006).

At the same time, the single-minded concern for the values embedded in cultural observance neglects a consideration of the everyday material lives of immigrants, as an important part of their family lives. In a recent article (Tyyskä 2008), my goal was to shed light on the gender division of paid and unpaid work in Sri Lankan Tamil immigrant families. Work is an important aspect of the daily material culture of immigrant families and is subject to negotiation and change upon immigration and settlement. Shifts and continuities in this area do not apply only to adults (as described above) but are also part of teens' lives in their socialization toward taking on increasingly "adult" roles and responsibilities.

Men tend to be the breadwinners in most cultures while women tend to take on the bulk of daily domestic responsibilities (child care, cooking, cleaning). Men take on occasional domestic tasks such as household maintenance and yard work. This situation is expressed in notion of a double day of work for women who normatively combine participation in the paid work force with the burden of domestic work (Tyyskä 2007, Krahn and Lowe 2003). The cycle continues through generations as girls get raised toward primary domesticity while boys get raised toward being breadwinners.

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In the context of immigrant families, we need to be sensitive to culturally based family strategies of survival. For example, as explained above, Tamil families have a tradition of family loyalty, filial obligation and reliance on extended kin. When extended ties break upon immigration, it is up to the members of the nuclear family to negotiate tasks and expectations among themselves. Amidst the financial pressures of immigration, it is likely that new patterns of support emerge that are, nevertheless, in keeping with traditional patterns. As indicated, Tamil children in Sri Lanka participate in paid work if their parents are in need. Similar expectations are reasonable upon immigration, given the general drop in status of living.

Indeed, most Tamil youth (Tyyskä 2006) reported familial pooling of resources based on gender divisions. Male Tamil teens reported a higher rate of wage-work participation than the female teens who were more dependent on money from their parents. However, young women and men alike reported giving money to their parents if needed. It is this pooling of money that may account for the high degree of home ownership among these particular families, though the issue of sponsorship debt to extended family still looms large at least for some of them. It seems that it is up to parents and teen males to carry the burden, with suggestions in the literature that the load is larger for adult males who may carry more than one job (Kendall 1989, Kandasamy 1995).

The gender division of work is reflected in patterns of decision-making power in families. Wage-earner status gives the teen males more say in their families. The young Tamil men reported giving advice to their parents, reflective of their masculine status and wage-earning position. There was less evidence of this among the young women whose contributions to family finances are through "banking" of family funds gained from allowances or occasional gifts of money, rather than earning employment incomes. Though they also gave money to their parents when needed, they reported having less say in their families. Thus, while the traditional pattern of deference to parents may be breaking for male teens, the pattern continues for the young women.

Many of the Tamil families in the study uphold traditional gender patterns in domestic work. These, however, are muted or changed in some instances, due to the comparatively high levels of education and participation in wage work by the mothers in the sample. It seems that maternal wage work participation puts pressure on both adult males and all teens to share the domestic work load. It is particularly notable in that the teens reported increased domestic work participation in instances where their fathers reportedly did little or nothing. This sharing of household labour may also be explained by the absence of an extended family to share domestic tasks.

Thus, focusing on adults' gender division of labour gives a false picture of the full scope of work taking place in families. It seems that at least in some immigrant families, the stresses and demands of making a living, involving both mothers and fathers in the wage work force and the lack of customary help from adults in the extended family, are a driving force toward changes in both wage and domestic work arrangements of the younger generations. These are a part of familial and cultural patterns that require much more study and attention in order to get an accurate and balanced picture of what is taking place in parent-youth relations in immigrant communities.

From the intergenerational battlefield to reconciling contradictory intergenerational practices

In addressing the full scope of "culturally" based and defined activities, my research into intergenerational relationships in Iranian and Tamil families, through the

eyes of teens, opens up new ground for research in relation to the five themes outlined above. The first aspect requiring emphasis is the need to consider youths' views of family life to round out the significant literature on parental issues and concerns. It is through these types of studies that we can, second, uncover the often significant contributions of immigrant youth to their families' survival and well-being amidst their families' financial pressures. Interviews with youth clearly illuminate aspects of intergenerational relations that are not captured in parental interviews alone. Third, there are patterns of both continuity and change in family relations and hierarchies upon immigration and settlement. Some traditional patterns prevail while others change significantly. Fourth, my studies underline the need for a consistent gender analysis in intergenerational relationships. The lives of immigrant youth need to be contextualized through an examination of culturally based gender scripts of behaviour. Fifth, there are important differences between cohorts of immigrant youth in relation to their history of arrival (i.e., the differences between "first" and "second" generations and the "one and a half" generation – those who immigrated as children) that need to be captured. Sixth and finally, we need to expand the term "culture" to include a wider array of non-material and material aspects.

In summary, this article highlights the importance of examining multiple aspects of parent-youth relationships in immigrant families in order to avoid negative stereotyping of all immigrant families as intergenerational battlefields. The study also points to the need to shift the focus from parent informants to youth informants in studies of intergenerational relationships. If we are to understand families fully, we need to account for the experiences and perceptions of all family members, not only parents. Like all parents, many immigrant parents want and seek for opportunities for more effective parenting (Tyyskä and Colavecchia 2001). A good starting point is to create more and richer dialogue between the parties across the generational divide.

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