

## **BETWEEN TWO WORLDS: AGGRESSION AND RESILIENCE IN IMMIGRANT GIRLS**

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### **Abstract**

Two focus group conversations with seven immigrant girls from five countries were held to examine strengths and barriers in the enculturation process and experiences of within-group hostilities. Five of the seven girls lived in single-parent families, and most girls had experienced trauma and loss in their journey to the U.S. Qualitative analysis using Gilligan et al. (2002) method suggested that strengths and barriers are interactive. Girls reported barriers to enculturation including prejudice from mainstream peers and restrictions by family, as well as strengths of pride in themselves and high career and academic aspirations. An interaction was found between the girls' barriers and strengths. Some barriers, such as involvement and restrictions of parents and distancing acculturated peers, could also be seen as resiliency factors. This paradox was true for restrictions by parents, paternalistic beliefs from fathers and native cultures, parenting responsibilities and distancing by acculturated peers. The girls perceived the benefits of acculturating without losing their native language, heritage, or cultural identity. Recommendations are made for understanding the needs of immigrant girls and building programs to support them in schools.

### **Immigration Themes**

The new immigrant to the U.S. faces significant challenges including language barriers, learning the ways of a new country, becoming educated, and finding employment. The process of enculturation has several components, three of which are relevant to this discussion: acculturation, assimilation and biculturalism. Along a timeline of enculturation, acculturation occurs first as immigrants or ethnic groups adjust socially to U.S. ways, while "retaining ethnic attachments and identity" (Lu, 2001, p. 206). Cultural patterns shift as individuals influence and are influenced by their host country. Successful acculturation enables immigrants to be bicultural: they interact successfully in both mainstream and primary cultural settings, enhanced by both and diminished by neither. In contrast, assimilation involves discarding cultural identity and "absorb(ing)" mainstream culture (Lu, 2001, p. 207), as in the "melting pot."

Becoming bicultural implies that the individual participates actively in both the native and dominant cultures (Szapocnik and Kurtines, 1995). It would seem that the bicultural individual might be the most successful immigrant, with a lifestyle including both consistent contact with the host culture and ongoing support from the native culture. Little research, however, exists to support this assumption.

The process of immigration varies both psychologically and physically, depending on whether the immigration is temporary or permanent, voluntary or involuntary (Ogbu, 1987). Whereas a voluntary immigrant has planned the move, an involuntary immigrant has been wrested from her homeland by situations over which she had no control. Both the adjustment and the goals of immigrants differ between these groups. A voluntary, willing immigrant may be more eager to merge in the new culture, while a forced, unwilling immigrant may retain idealizations of the native country, feeling nostalgic for the ways of life in a world that political changes wrested away from her.

The process of acculturation has significant implications for adolescents' adjustment, as they establish a self-identity that is influenced by both cultures. Conflicts between native and dominant cultures in terms of traditional sex roles and education of women may provide barriers to acculturation and adjustment of girls. For example, the girls in this study all attended empowerment groups for immigrant girls, but the notion of

empowerment of girls may be fraught with conflicts for girls operating between two worlds. Martinez (2003) found that the process of enculturation proves to be a risk factor for immigrant youth. Higher levels of enculturation for Latino immigrant youth are associated with increased engagement in risky behaviors and negative outcomes, like disengagement from school, and increased drug use and criminality.

The purpose of these groups was to examine the experiences of immigrant girls including within-group social aggression, strengths and barriers in the enculturation process, and to use this information for intervention and support.

## **Method**

### Participants

Seven girls who participated in empowerment groups engaged in two focus groups. The girls were between the ages of fifteen and seventeen. All had been born in a foreign country and had immigrated to the United States. Two girls were from Somalia, two from Russia, one from Vietnam, one from Singapore, and one from Laos. One girl was already a U.S. citizen, having moved here at the age of six. Five of the seven girls had no father present in the family. Several girls had experienced the trauma of war, abuse, or economic hardship. All attended public high schools in an urban county. Most girls had attended a transitional international school for immigrant youth for their first year of public school. There they were exposed to youth from a broad spectrum of nationalities; in this way, they began to experience the acculturative expectations of public schooling. Most girls had already returned to the regular public schools in the districts where they lived.

### Procedures

The girls traveled from the metropolitan area where they lived for an overnight retreat in a comfortable home. They participated in two focus group discussions, guided by a series of questions, and reflected on their experiences as immigrants, the strengths of their culture, and stereotypes other people have about them.

The groups consisted of all seven girls, two familiar adult leaders, and two researchers. Discussion was recorded on two tape recorders to ensure accurate and complete data. Initial warm-up questions asked girls to remember specific experiences from the ages of five and 10 and currently. The first discussion question asked them to reflect on their experiences about moving to the U.S. and prompted stories of war and family stresses. The second focus group began with the question of whether they had experienced hostility or distancing from kids from their native culture who had been here longer.

Audiotapes were transcribed onto spreadsheets, with about eight words per row. Those worksheets were recoded with pseudonyms after the transcription was complete. The researchers then analyzed and coded the data individually. Worksheets were read by all three authors and discrepancies resolved by the lead author.

### Analysis

The Listening Guide (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, and Bertsch, 2002) was the model on which this analysis was based. The method has transformed over the years from an initial focus on justice and caring to a more inclusive framework that suggests that ‘listeners,’ as opposed to the ‘readers’ of the 1991 model, choose their own “contrapuntal voices” (Gilligan et al., , 2002, p. 159), and seek out examples of those for analysis. The method involves repeated readings of interviews with specific objectives for each reading. First, the transcripts are read for the plot, the context, and an evaluation of the perspective of the listener and how our positions as listeners, different from the speakers, affect our interpretation and response. In other words, where do we as readers “connect” with the speaker, and where do we “disconnect?”

In Step Two, the narratives are turned into “I Poems” by subtracting everything but I-statements from the text, to elicit a sense of how the speaker voices her own reality. Step Two was not used for this analysis because it was initially designed for individual interviews instead of focus groups and did not prove to be as insightful as the other steps. Step Three is iterative and involves the choice of contrapuntal voice(s) to listen for and evaluate. In this analysis, we chose two pairs of contrapuntal voices: barriers/strengths and victim/aggressor. Step Four involves composing an analysis of what the listener has learned through the process, including a description of the process. Overall, the purpose of the Listening Guide is to develop listening skills that enable us to hear the “collectivity of different voices” (Gilligan et al., 2002, p. 157) from each speaker, including her history, her joys, her fears, her loves, and her masks. With the Listening Guide the listeners also work to allow the speaker’s meaning to be heard independently of the biases and differing perspective of the listener/interpreter.

In our analyses, the themes of personal strengths and barriers became evident through the girls' discussions about navigating a new culture. These became the ‘contrapuntal voices’ we listened to. The girls talked about their experiences with peers, both supportive and conflicting. The conflicting relationships did return to a theme of holding on to native beliefs and culture, versus shaming over “differences” by peers from the same native country who had likely assimilated with mainstream U.S. culture.

## **Results**

### **Strengths and Barriers**

Three major strengths the girls drew from were the interpersonal bonds with family and peers that affirmed their core identity, their development of intrinsic strengths including taking on parental roles, excelling at academics, and their development of personal interests as a means for self-expression. The major barriers, to the extent the girls demonstrated any, were prejudice from whites and cultural stereotypes from either parents or society in general. These barriers were countered, however, by examples of attitudes of pride in themselves, appreciation for their families and native cultures, high career and academic aspirations, and mature analysis and perspective-taking skills.

Some interesting tensions are at work in the girls’ lives, as these factors that create resilience can serve as both barriers and strengths. Whether girls speak of family ties, strictness of parents, or refuge in contexts with others from their native countries, these examples exist in a tension between maintaining one’s original cultural identity versus assimilation.

The girls in this group resist assimilation into mainstream peer culture, and they feel an ongoing tension between doing what it takes to “fit in” and adopting behaviors that deny them the strengths from their native cultures. For example, they relish the chance to “be themselves” by segregating according to nationality in the cafeteria, even though they get along with mainstream peers in class. This resistance may be at the root of the within-group hostility to the extent that we found it. One girl mentioned an assimilated peer she rejects who doesn’t hang out with same-culture peers as a function of the assimilated peer’s acceptance by mainstream peers— “She’s just like the American girls.” Another example of the strength of this tension between acculturation and assimilation is the restriction that parents place on the girls. The girls find this restriction oppressive, but from the girls’ explanations, this parent behavior may be motivated by their fear of the girls assimilating and losing their cultural identity.

This evaluation will begin by examining the strengths and barriers expressed by the girls and move on to the enculturation tensions. With this order, it will be easier to show how the girls’ strengths mitigate those tensions.

### Strengths

Interpersonal bonds seem to provide the girls with the strength to face their challenges with positive attitudes and prosocial goals. Bonds with family and peers support these girls and their development of self-esteem and confidence.

Addressing questions about what they remember from different ages in their childhoods, the girls repeatedly speak with fondness of experiences with parents and extended family that involved playfulness and caring. Eating special popsicles, playing in fabric stores, sitting in a relative's lap, and playing games with a grandmother are stories that elicit smiles and comfort for the girls. The girls' stories are mostly about their mothers, whom they describe as the "woman of the house and the man of the house" or as the one who "always turns out to be right."

Primary culture ties are manifest in choices of best friends. Donna explains that she and the friend she made from her native country, "Don't ask . . . we're more than friends." In most schools kids follow an engrained pattern of sitting segregated by nationality in the cafeteria, where they can banter and engage in interchange that is outside mainstream cultural norms. This ritual seems to give students the chance to relax and be themselves, without concern for judgment by Americans or fitting in.

I think that if you stay with a lot of Americans they don't even respect you. They don't respect you like your country, your own country, will respect you.

It seems that within the controlled context of the classroom, the immigrant girls socialize and interact positively with American youth, but when they have a choice of whom to interact with, they gravitate toward peers from the same culture: "Yeah, and then when we're in class it's like we're all friends but at lunch time it's all separate."

Family support for high career aspirations and economic independence for their daughters is expressed across the immigrant cultures from both parents, but especially mothers. Education is parents' "highest goal for their kids." Karen's mom tells her to "study hard, you know, to be the best so you can like, have power by your own." Kira says that her ". . . mom always makes women sound really important. She always tells me that you should never be dependent on a man because women have lots and lots of power too." The acceptance by the girls of this plan for self-sufficiency demonstrates an intrinsic strength the girls share.

Another intrinsic strength is confidence, expressed matter-of-factly and accepted as a given. Donna comments regarding her anticipated move to a new high school, "I wasn't as confident as I am now," and Kira describes the kind of people who value her uniqueness:

Well, there's like a lot of people. Well, like lots of people do appreciate the fact that "I am who I am." . . . They always ask me to translate something for them or write something for them, teach them stuff.

Donna seems to take in stride her role as support to her single mother, as "second mother" to her brothers. This role seems to work for her: "But um, I guess my mom needs me, you know, and I need her too, so we help each other out." Allison is similarly confident: "So, yeah, I helped raise my brothers, and they respect my authority."

### Barriers

Barriers expressed by the girls include prejudice, paternalistic attitudes from male relatives, and restrictions imposed by their parents. The prejudice constitutes a primary barrier imposed by mainstream culture that impacts their confidence and social goals and relations. The girls' families and culture were often the source

of paternalistic attitudes toward females, but these sources also emphasized the importance of girls being strong and getting an education. As a result, these perceived barriers not only create angst and frustration for the girls, but also work as protective factors.

Prejudice is painful for the girls. They experience overt rejection by mainstream peers based on cultural norms like language, accent, clothing, and physical characteristics. They face the cultural ideal of blonde hair and blue eyes as the model of ‘American,’ an insurmountable barrier the girls navigate and negotiate in their identity development. Allison, the most acculturated group member, moved to America at the age of six. A boy on the playground taunted her around age 10, inferring that her “ugly” dark hair and skin harmed him or made him “blind.” She pretended that what he said didn’t matter to her.

Social aggression spurred by prejudice is usually covert. Ukrainian Kira explains,

Well it's kind of complicated at certain times, like at school it's hard, like to get along with people sometimes ‘cause like most of the people at our school look at us and judge us a certain way. They'll just roll their eyes and just like walk away.

She values the difference between those people and others who care about her.

Well the people that actually talk to me actually probably care about knowing other cultures and other people. And like the ones that roll their eyes and walk away they just care about what like you look like and you have to be just like them and you can't be different at all.

This aggression occurs in response to attributes over which the girls have no control. Regardless of their acculturation and skill in mainstream social settings, the bar just keeps getting higher, be it their clothes, their accent, or what they wear in their hair. They reject any notion of assimilation, perhaps because they feel it is not possible. Instead they affirm their primary cultural identity. Martha says, “Just do like the Americans do but you'll never be just like the Americans--you weren't...” and Debra interrupts, “Yeah, you're not white, you don't have blonde hair and blue eyes.” Martha continues, “Yeah, you just (inaudible). They don't want me, I don't need them. I'm Somalian.”

Then Donna de-constructs the blonde/blue ideal that seems to be what they feel their peers would demand before really accepting them, “I think being American is a combination of things and you don't have to be white to be American, you don't have to be white, you know, blonde hair blue eyes. No one can be really American, except for the Native Americans, not that I think about it.” Here, Donna understands the rule that the blonde/blue stereotype has no basis in justice or even potential within the diversity of America, but she reveals a hidden concern with the issue by denying that the topic or problem is something she really cares about. Indeed it sounds likely that she *has* been thinking about it.

The girls agree that language differences are a major concern as a potential source of ridicule by peers. It was a major part of their initial discomfort as immigrants, as in the example of not knowing enough English language to recognize which language that the peers in their international school were speaking. They give examples of themselves and others not being willing to even speak, because of not only knowledge barriers, but also fear of ridicule. Being scared as a new immigrant is another phenomenon the girls universally affirmed experiencing.

Paternalistic attitudes from fathers and native cultures is a theme, and the girls acknowledge that their families treat girls and boys differently. Donna explains,

The boys can do whatever they want. . . Back home and here too. So it's here and there. It's

for our safety... boys won't come home with their stomachs in front of them... And they think that if girls go out and try to do things that they'll just come home pregnant.

The girls cite examples in how girls and boys are treated. Some girls aren't allowed to bring friends home unless the friends are from the same nationality. Karen isn't allowed to give out her phone number and some parents won't allow friends to visit at the house because of fear of repercussions: "They won't let you stay for a long time. Like they won't let your other friends sleep over . . . If something happens to them, they like, the parents can arrest me." Several girls spoke of the expectations that they function as a second parent to their siblings, an expectation that was not imposed on their brothers.

In one case, a father forced his daughter to quit playing on the national soccer team because it's not something a girl should do. Donna says, "Yeah, . . . so we didn't get along very well so after that I had to quit. I had to give-in to him, but I regret giving-in to him until today."

In the face of these experiences, family cohesion, accomplished by their mothers, buffers concerns for partiality that may exist from within-family conflicts. Speaking of her parenting role for her younger brothers with her single mom, Allison says, "They don't have their father and I don't have my father so it's my mother and I who raised my brothers. And, we're their parents. It'll always be that way. It'll always be the four of us. No matter what." Martha's recounting of life in her childhood in Somalia is equally matter-of-fact: "Yeah it would just get bad and bad, it would never get better. So my dad just left us. So my mom have to do everything. Like she have to go look for us some food. She have to--she have to be the woman of the house and the man of the house."

#### Barriers as Protections

Two examples illustrate how perceived barriers have proven to be protective of the girls' outcomes. One, the barrier from their native country's paternalistic attitudes is transformed by mothers' affirmation of the importance of their pursuit of academics and economic independence. Two, the barrier of restrictions on peer interactions and dress are protections against unlimited assimilation into cultural norms in the United States that could draw them away from cultural traditions that feed their identities. This same tension exists in the within-group hostility the girls experience from others and that they exert themselves.

#### Within-group Hostility

When facilitators probe about any experience of hostility between newer and more experienced immigrants, the girls deny that this had happened; subsequently, however, girls bring up examples of the phenomenon. Martha mentions that there was "a girl, she acts like she's too good for other Somalis..." who has lived here "since she was young." This had happened as well with Karen, who describes conversations with girls from Vietnam who have been here longer. In her experience, other girls sometimes speak in a mix of Vietnamese and English in a way that is hard to understand. At these times, Karen feels like she is "not part of the conversation." The mixed language seems to serve an exclusionary function for the acculturated girls who want to assert their differences and distance from her.

Another example of within-group hostility is given by a participant who harbors negative feelings toward same-country peers who smoke and behave irresponsibly.

Some Somalis here in Oregon right now, teenagers, are being really stupid because they got a chance like to learn and just be educated and just get themselves in a higher place you know and instead they're just gonna hang out, smoke. (Another Somali speaker: We have a lot of student dropped out too.) They don't know how lucky they are to actually be in America, and have the chance to be educated and they're not taking advantage of that chance.

Her observation is particularly poignant since she clings to her identity as a Somali and plans to go back to her country when the war was over to help her people. Whereas our acculturating Somalis engage in persistent within-group solidarity, she seems to reject some assimilated group members, perhaps out of embarrassment at their failure to retain some values she associates with her Somali background. These non-assimilated girls in the focus group still have a strong ethos of striving for self-improvement in the “land of opportunity.” This criticism by this refuge of her assimilated peers contrasts Karen’s hurt feelings in response to distancing snubs from her assimilated Vietnamese peers.

The Somali girls also express disparagement toward a teacher who is not African-African, but “half-and-half” Mexican and African. Could there be a within-culture prestige in maintaining the purity of the race, resulting in negative feelings toward persons whose heritage is diluted? Inter-racial marriage is an example of assimilation, and here we have another example that the aggression between the groups goes both ways.

An interesting tension exists regarding acculturation versus assimilation. These particular girls may all be in the process of acculturation, able to skillfully interact in school and casual relationships yet defending the preservation of their primary culture. On the other hand, their peers who have assimilated regard their adoptions of mainstream beliefs and cultural values to be a source of pride and difference. They look down on those acculturated peers who haven’t yet abandoned native ties.

## **Discussion**

During informal conversation after the focus groups, the girls discussed their strengths and affirmed the importance of acculturation as the limit for their interaction with mainstream culture. They want to preserve their ability to speak their native language, a strong link to their heritage and their cultural identity. They see language as a link that they can hold onto, to maintain their identity as part of their primary culture. The Russian girls discussed how their relatives prided themselves on their accents and language skill. One Russian girl explained that she worries about her loss of language skill, which has resulted in her reluctance to practice her native language with visiting relatives.

Debra and Allison were both explicit about the tension. They feel torn “between two cultures.” They want to make friends, be happy, and find success—and they don’t want to “abandon” their cultures. For Allison this took the extreme of rejecting mainstream American culture: “I never want to claim myself as being American.” For Debra, it meant her repeating, over and over, “I’m Somalian.”

The tension they feel themselves and with their parents has to do with the conflict between their desire to engage with mainstream peers and their parents’ fear that they will abandon their culture. It may turn out that the barriers their parents are presenting may be the protection they need to maintain their cultural ties and avoid assimilation.

Care should be taken in interpreting these data, as the research is preliminary and qualitative. The girls who attended the retreat were unique in that they had attended a series of support groups designed for religious and ethnic minority girls, yet they differed from their peers in these groups, as their parents gave permission for them to attend this retreat.

These qualitative data suggest several themes that should be considered when programs develop strategies for supporting girls’ choices and development. These include (1) examining specific ways the girls can advance the development of their educational and career goals for the purpose of self-reliance; (2) making intentional choices about biculturalism and the maintenance of cultural traditions in immigrants lives; (3) taking the time for the girls to “name” their strengths, goals, tensions, and barriers, so as to lay claim to their experience in

an intentional way as they balance living “between two worlds”; and (4) thinking about the relationship of within-group hostility and social aggression in immigrant girls’ lives from the larger research context.

Exploration of these and other examples of how youth and families achieve health in their adaptation to social and personal challenges will contribute to schools’ ability to respond to the changing demographics of the 21st century.

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## Biography

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**Michelle Jensen**, Ph.D., is an educator whose research interests include resiliency and risk factors in girls, school-based supports for Latino students, and academic achievement of at-risk students. As an educator, Dr. Jensen has worked with youth and in schools for over 10 years. A former teacher and prevention coordinator, Michelle weaves her experience in schools with her training in general and special education, resiliency enhancement and risk prevention, and diversity issues. In addition to her research, she provides schools and community agencies with professional development, project evaluation and curriculum development. A child of immigrants, Dr. Jensen is bicultural and fluent in Spanish. She is currently a research associate/program

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**Debra Eisert**, Ph.D., is currently an associate professor of pediatrics at Oregon Health Sciences University and works as a psychologist at the Child Development and Rehabilitation Center in Eugene. Dr. Eisert is also an associate professor at the University of Oregon where she is affiliated with the University Center of Excellence on Developmental Disabilities and serves on the UCE management team and the Multicultural committee. She is also affiliated with the Institute on violence and Destructive Behavior where she directs the Girls Research Interest Network (GRIN) and does research on at-risk girls. Her current interests focus on the development of at-risk girls and the impact of trauma and violence on children and adolescents.