Belonging in Unaccompanied Youth and Transnational Adoptees: A Call to Action

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A Deep Dive into Concepts

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Abstract

The population of immigrant youth in the United States continues to grow. These youth often face extreme adversity during their immigration journey. Two subsets of immigration youth that are not typically studied together but have similarities are transnational adoptees and unaccompanied youth. Their experiences pre- and post-immigration can be similar. By focusing on the similarities of these two subgroups and their sense of belonging, I will extrapolate potential future opportunities that communities and academia can move towards to increase immigrant youth's sense of belonging and future success. These include training and education for individuals and organizations that play significant roles in immigrant youth wellbeing, determining methods of meaningfully maintaining a connection to heritage culture, and determining the feasibility and best practices of integrating health related services into schools and community centers.

Keywords: Transnational adoptees, unaccompanied youth, belonging, acculturation

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There are over seventeen million youth with at least one immigrant parent in the United States. Of those, there are over two million that are foreign-born (Migration Policy Institute, 2013). This is a population that can vary widely in country of origin as well as reason for immigration. These youth arrive to the U.S. facing a tremendous amount of adversity and needing to successfully acculturate in American culture after potentially experiencing significant amounts of trauma prior to their arrival. To do this, communities need to understand the needs of these children so they can become productive members of society.

In this paper, I will explore the experiences of two sub-populations of immigrant youth, unaccompanied youth and transnational adoptees, as a mode to extrapolate the needs of immigrant youth broadly. Sense of belonging will be explored as a means to increase adjustment into American culture and suggest future areas of opportunity.

Immigrant Youth

Immigrant youth is an exceedingly broad category. This population could include children who were born to one immigrant parent, those that migrate on their own to a new country, adoptees from other countries, those that migrate with their families to another country, and many other situations where youth find themselves outside of their country of birth, or heritage country. This separation from heritage country, which can often include familial separation, can be incredibly traumatic (Hübinette, 2004; NeMoyer et al., 2019).

The scientific study of immigrant youth often has conflicting information. Some of this is because of the inclusion or exclusion of certain populations which can be both purposeful or practical. Additionally, much of this population may not be interested in participating in studies

as there could be concerns about citizenship status and deportation as they may not have their green cards (Schapiro et al., 2018). In some situations, as in the case of transnational adoptees and many youth that were born abroad as American citizens, these youth may operate in what they consider a third space and may not choose to participate in research studies as they may not identify as an immigrant youth (Lee et al., 2010).

This lack of information about immigrant youth is what makes the population so interesting and provides plenty of growth opportunities in the research field. Various populations are studied in silos, with only brief, if any mention of migration experience. I believe it is the study of the immigrant youth overall and in sub-group comparison, that will provide fruitful information on how to boost immigrant youth's overall well-being.

This paper will dive deeper into two specific categories of immigrant youth, unaccompanied youth and transnational adoptees. Although very different on the surface, there are vast similarities and needs that these two populations share. By focusing on these two smaller populations, I can then extrapolate the needs of immigrant youth generally, and make suggestions for future actions to increase their likelihood of becoming productive American citizens.

Unaccompanied Youth

Unaccompanied youth, in this paper, are individuals who, between the ages of one and twenty-four, immigrated to the United States without their families. Their reasons for migrating may include gang violence, hope of a better life in the U.S., work opportunities, and ability to send money home to family. However, although assumptions can be made about the reasoning for migrating, "very little is known about the decision-making process and the extent to which

families weigh the dangers of sending the youth on their own" (Garcia & Birman, 2022, p. 98). Ultimately, this is because the push-pull factors of immigration are deeply intertwined. For example, if a parent migrates and secures employment, this can increase the likelihood of kidnapping and expedites the need for immigration (Kandel, 2014). These threats in conjunction with the potential benefits leads families to send their children regardless of the significantly dangerous journeys that are undertaken to get to the U.S. These journeys make the youth an easy target for those that have less than desirable intentions.

In 2019, it was estimated that there were over two million total undocumented children in the U.S (Migration Policy Institute, n.d.). In 2023, there were 118,938 unaccompanied youth that were referred to the Office of Refugee Resettlement (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2024b) and 137,000 total unaccompanied youth that were stopped by border patrol agents (Batalova, 2024). However, the actual number of unaccompanied youth is unknown and is most likely higher as actual numbers of immigrants into the U.S. can only be estimated. 69% were over the age of 15 and 20% were between the ages of 0 and 12. 79% were originally from the Northern Triangle which includes Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. 61% were male (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2024a). However, heritage countries of unaccompanied youth vary depending on what is happening politically and economically throughout the world (Crea et al., 2018). Upon arrival, the danger persists as arrival in the U.S. may mean avoiding deportation, and learning to assimilate into the culture that could be vastly different from the one that they departed (Crea et al., 2018; Maioli et al., 2021).

Transnational Adoptees

Transnational adoptees are children that, between the ages of birth and eighteen, are adopted from a country outside of the country from which they were born (LSD.law, n.d.). Transnational adoptions have decreased 93% between 2004 and 2022 (23,000 and 1,517, respectively). The total number of transnational adoptions that occurred in the U.S. between 1999 and 2022 is 282,921. The largest proportion of these children were adopted from China, India, Colombia, and South Korea (USAFacts, 2023). Influxes of children from other countries can change over time depending on factors like war and natural disasters. For example, between the 1950's and today, over 125,000 Korean children were adopted, however, Korean adoptions are now extremely rare (Laybourn, 2018).

There are some that consider adoption itself as a form of trauma. In the transnational adoptee population, age of adoption can drastically influence the amount of trauma that is experienced, as older children tend to have spent significant time in orphanages in their heritage country. This can thus lead to more struggle when acculturating into the U.S. as language proficiency and cultural differences from the heritage country will be more developed in the older children (Harwood et al., 2013). This trauma is magnified when transnational adoptees are also transracial, or adopted children of parents of a different race, as they typically grow up in White families and communities, and may be considered honorarily White, but others perceive them as ethnic and racial minorities (Lee et al., 2010). In addition, identity formation can be difficult as transnational adoptees, as others and sometimes even extended family are expected to be experts in their heritage country when they may have little to no knowledge of that culture (Laybourn, 2018). Trauma can also be increased when adoptees are of mixed-race heritage. For example, "in Vietnam they were seen as not quite Vietnamese due

to their mixed-race identity, and in the United States they encountered discrimination because of their Vietnamese ancestry" (McKee, 2021, p. 236). This most often occurred when adoptees come from war-torn countries and are mixed-race children born to fathers who were military personnel from the U.S. (McKee, 2021).

Similarities

Transnational adoptees and unaccompanied youth have many similarities in their experiences both pre- and post-immigration. Many in these two populations experienced significant trauma in their process of arriving to the U.S. Because of this, these populations may have significant mental health issues that other migrants may not have (Askeland et al., 2017; Harwood et al., 2013; Maioli et al., 2021; Marsh, 2017).

Generally speaking, it is a well-known paradox that first generation immigrants have better mental health than subsequent generations (Zambrano, 2010), however, first generation immigrants and thus, immigrant youth, still tend to have more mental health issues than Americans of similar ages (Close et al., 2016). In particular, mental health can be greatly impacted by age upon arrival in a new country as older age of migration shows decreases in mental health (Ferrari et al., 2015). This can lead to an increase in experiencing cultural conflicts: **“**Cultural conflict is defined as feeling torn between one's two cultural identities (vs. feeling that they are compatible), and cultural distance is the perception that one's two cultural identities are separate and dissociated (vs. fused)" (Ferrari et al., 2015, p. 65). By nature, transnational adoptees and unaccompanied youth are bicultural and upon immigration, can easily find themselves in conflict with their heritage culture and the culture that they live in. There are inconsistent findings in studies looking at ethnic identity and mental health as many

studies do not acknowledge the bicultural experiences of these two populations (Ferrari et al., 2015).

Both transnational adoptees and unaccompanied youth can arrive in the U.S. with extensive physical health issues from elongated, dangerous travel or poor living conditions prior to immigration, both of which provide sub-prime conditions for youth to maintain good physical health. Issues can include malnutrition, physical injury, and sexual assault (Cheng & Lo, 2022; Maioli et al., 2021; Tarren-Sweeney, 2010). Not only do these issues cause physical harm, but that physical harm can negatively impact mental health.

Immigrant youth tend to struggle in American schools as they may not be performing at what is considered grade-level because of differing or lack of school systems in their heritage countries. English language acquisition can be a true barrier to learning, especially if immigrant youth are arriving using rural dialects where translators may be difficult to locate (Beier et al., 2022; Crea et al., 2018). Additionally, the cultural norms of the immigrant youth's heritage countries may not focus on education, leading to distress and confusion, in particular when youth arrived in the U.S. to be able to work and send money back to their families (Canizales, 2023).

Although research in acculturation in unaccompanied youth is limited, it is clear that both unaccompanied youth as well as transnational adoptees are more likely to be successful post-immigration if a sense of safety and connectedness are established (Crea et al., 2018; Evans et al., 2022; Merritt, 2021). The trust in establishing and maintaining safety and connections can be particularly difficult in these two populations as these are experiences with which they may be unfamiliar after abandonment, possible abuse, and trauma. However,

difficult does not mean impossible. It is important to slowly build relationships that can help move these youth forward.

These similarities in unaccompanied youth and transnational adoptees are important because we can then extrapolate these findings to other subsets of immigrant youth in terms of their experiences and needs. To do so, "a strengths-based perspective that locates problems and challenges in the contexts that surround them rather than individuals is particularly needed in research on immigrants to counter narratives of risk, distress, and pathology" (Garcia & Birman, 2022, p. 81). Continuing to conduct research that primarily focuses on a deficiency model will only lead to more adverse findings instead of solutions.

Belonging

Belonging, as defined in academia, is the self-perception of an individual's desire to connection with others (Rogers, 1951). The feeling of belonging includes many parts of the self and their environment including but not limited to family, friends, community, racial identity, and group affiliation. Because of this, belonging is a state that can change at any given time and can be different for any given individual within various contexts. For example, Person A was reprimanded at work and their belonging to their workplace goes down. However, when returning home, Person A's family listens and shows unwavering support, increasing Person A's belonging at home.

The need for belonging is so great that exclusion not only causes emotional pain, but has also been shown to cause physical pain as shown in neural processing scans (Eisenberger et al., 2003). Any form of rejection can cause this pain. The most common rejections occur due to an individual's divergence from the majority population. Thus, individuals with backgrounds of

minority cultures and ethnicities, perceived or real variations in physical appearance, disability, and obesity can experience an increase in rejection (Harrist & Bradley, 2002). For immigrant children, this is particularly difficult as not only could they appear to be physically different, but they have the stigma of not being American by birth which can prevent them from blending into the communities they find themselves within. Added to this is the identity exploration based on their immigrant story or journey. For very young immigrants the feeling of nonbelonging can occur because their stories and history may not be known to them (Darnell et al., 2017).

Nonbelonging has a direct connection to finding belonging in outgroups. In the U.S., there are approximately two to five million people that are affiliated with up to 5,000 cults (Robinson et al., 1997) and more than a million people affiliated with more than 33,000 gangs (World Population Review, n.d.). Additionally, children that don't feel like they belong to school are at the greatest risk for being radicalized or to become part of an extremist group (Hogg et al., 2010). Cult and gang affiliation as well as extremist behavior are all tied to an individual's need for purpose, safety, and belonging (Curry, 2004; Lenzi et al., 2019; Lyons-Padilla et al., 2015; Zhang, 2017). This is particularly important as living in low-income neighborhoods, experiencing trauma, loss, or abuse, and those immigrants who have both rejected their heritage culture and do not identify with the culture in which they live, who feel marginalized or ostracized, or have experienced discrimination have increased chances of affiliation with these outgroups (Lyons-Padilla et al., 2015). Unaccompanied youth and transnational adoptees often have several of these risk factors. In particular, is the idea that as immigrants, these youth feel that they neither fit in with the country that they left nor the country in which they live.

Currently, unaccompanied youth and transnational adoptees are often not provided the services that they need to increase belonging and decrease risk of outgroup affiliation. Support is typically left to adoptive or foster parents who may not have the financial or social means to locate the various services that these children need to find success (Beier et al., 2022). If resources are available, access and participation can be colored by the beliefs of the foster or adoptive parents who may think what is right or the perceptions that others may have on their actions (Clements et al., 2020; Randolph & Holtzman, 2010).

Studies have shown that immigrant youth, regardless of how they arrive, have the same belonging needs regardless of their route to the U.S. (Schapiro et al., 2018). To increase these youth's sense of belonging, it is most important to build significant relationships (e.g., foster/adoptive parents, mentors, counselors, coaches, or teachers) as this has been shown to lead to lower depression rates and an increase in sense of safety (Crea et al., 2018; Evans et al., 2022). This increased sense of belonging can then lead to easier "adjustment to the new country, overall well-being, and future economic and occupational success " (Evans et al., 2022, p. 1). If we want these youth to find success in their adulthood and the country's future, we must ensure that they belong within their communities.

Conclusion

There are many healthy ways that communities can help acculturate unaccompanied youth and transnational adoptees. In this conclusion, I will focus on three areas for consideration as future opportunities. These areas, I believe, would have significant impact on the overall health and wellbeing of immigrant youth.

First, research showing the importance of at least one significant, trusting adult relationship shows that it is imperative that these bonds be prioritized. The logical places to begin that work is in schools, community agencies, and foster or adoptive parents as these are the people and places that play significant roles in immigrant youth wellbeing. To do this, training and education needs to be provided to all parties so that supports can be put in place so that youth can better adjust to culture and the schools that they are in (Crea et al., 2018).

Second, community must learn that heritage culture is just as important as the culture immigrant youth are entering. Research needs to be done to determine methods of maintaining a connection to heritage culture in a meaningful way. Knowing that some individuals will respond well to varying forms of connection, it is important to create a toolbox for foster and adoptive parents as well as schools to allow for destigmatized and authentic heritage culture engagement. This will then provide immigrant youth with the ability to understand and feel confident in the bicultural identity.

Third, while maintaining a focus on belonging, physical wellbeing cannot be disregarded. Further research needs to investigate the true benefits, costs, and possibility of integrated services into schools and community centers. This research needs to focus on how school and physical and mental wellness service organizations can ensure that there are clear feedback loops and best practices in beginning and maintaining the integrated care model. As of yet, there are schools that are providing wellness services (Schapiro et al., 2018), however, HIPAA and educational confidentiality need to be tackled to determine true integrated services.

There is no single solution that can help immigrant youth acculturate to American society. However, there are tangible steps that can be taken to improve this experience for

young people upon their arrival to a country that many believe will provide them with greater opportunity.

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