Immigrant Adolescents and Culture Conflict

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INTRODUCTION

In the research report **Welfare of Migrants** (1975), it was noted that all the ethnic groups surveyed were deeply concerned about the problem of "culture conflict", which was seen as a generation gap in which cultural differences were significant in producing conflict. For the social worker the anxiety, tension and intra-psychic confusion, which this paper attempts to describe, indicates that it offers an important and challenging area for social work concern and involvement.

This paper attempts to briefly review some of the ways in which a generic social worker might assist immigrant adolescents experiencing culture conflict. The term "immigrant adolescent" is used to refer to those adolescents with immigrant parents who were born in Australia or who came here under five years of age, and for whom English is a second language. Thus immigrants of Anglo-Saxon origin are excluded from this study although it may be hypothesized that they also experience some form of culture conflict, perhaps in an altered or reduced form. Young adolescents, that is those still involved in full-time education, form the primary focus of interest, although much of the discussion may be equally relevant to older immigrant and non-immigrant adolescents as well as to members of other minorities, defined in racial, religious or socio-economic terms. The paper begins with a broad overview of the concept of adolescence followed by a discussion of the general nature of some of the possible forms of a culture conflict. This discussion draws upon concepts from the social sciences, social work theory and information gathered from a number of social work agencies in Melbourne. These agencies included the Australian-Greek Welfare Society, Prahran Council, Richmond Child-Care and Family Centre, Springvale Community Aid and Advice Bureau and Co-As-it.

Before beginning this analysis, a comment must be made about the vexed issue of use of generalizations, particularly in the situation where interpretation of the behaviour and values of a specific cultural group is made by someone who does not belong to that group. The dangers of crude generalization from an individual client to an entire ethnic group, as well as from one ethnic group to another, are fully acknowledged. However, a clear distinction must be drawn between generalization as a purely epistemological device, and stereotyping, which represents a rigid, biased and usually negative view of other groups or individuals identified with those groups. The social worker, regardless of ethnic origin will need to employ some generalizations to "make sense" of his data, but these generalizations should always be recognized as such, and tempered by the knowledge that the values, institutions and patterns of behaviour of all groups are in a constant state of evolutionary change. Above all, the social worker's primary commitment to recognizing the uniqueness of each individual must be re-emphasized.

CONCEPTUALIZATION

In conceptualizing any social problem, the "knowledge base" of social work offers two primary sources of information — that drawn directly from the social and behavioral sciences, and the "practice wisdom" developed by social workers in the course of their professional activities. (Baker, 1975, P.200) Information from both these sources can be used in analysing the particular constellation of bio-psychosocial factors which influence the growth and development of an immigrant adolescent.

The Concept of Adolescence

(1) **Bio-Psychosocial Tasks.** Adolescence has been described in terms of a biological, psychological and social developmental stage of human growth. Depending upon the particular perspective chosen, definitions of the duration of adolescence and the identification of sub-stages within the general period vary widely. **Biologically** adolescence has been broadly defined as the period between pubescence and the achievement of full physiological and reproductive maturity. It is recognized however, that the onset of adolescence varies with constitutional differences in times of sexual maturation and the influence of socio-economic and other cultural factors upon its duration. (Lidz, 1968, P.229).

Psychologically adolescence is "marked by an acceleration of cognitive growth and of personality formation" (Eisenstadt, 1967, p.269) while socially, the individual moves from childhood status to being fully recognized as an adult with an established social, sexual and occupational identity. The interrelationship between these broad development areas can be illustrated using the "system" and "task" concepts, with "task" being understood as adjustment demands made upon people by changing life situations. Viewing the individual as a bio-psychosocial system, the biological changes of pubescence necessitate a corresponding readjustment in the interrelated psychological and social components of this system. Thus the rapid maturation of secondary sexual characteristics confronts the adolescent with the "psychological task" of coming to terms with this change through revision and elaboration of body image. The upsurge in sexual feelings must be acknowledged as an outlet sought which is acceptable to the superego, which is also changing under the impact of cognitive growth and the developing capacity for abstract, logical thought. The development of a capacity for mature sexual expression requires an increasing individuation from the family of origin, made possible by the attainment of biological self-sufficiency, and marked by a re-orientation towards peer-group figures and values. These factors of increasing physical independence and developing genital sexuality also necessitate a change in social status within the wider social group. The adolescent, in general terms, must attempt to find an acceptable compromise between self-image and the role definition tendered by the wider society. This compromise represents the emergence of "ego identity".

(2) **The Concept of Ego Identity.** The complex of bio-psychosocial tasks outlined above represents the basis for Erikson's concept of the formation of "ego identify" as the main psychosocial task of adolescence. Ego identify or integration is formed out of

> "the accrued experience of the ego's ability to integrate all identification with the libido with the aptitudes developed out of endowment and with the opportunities offered in social roles." (Erikson, 1973, p.253)

In Erikson's view, failure to meet this psychosocial "crisis" leads to "identity confusion", characterized by factors such as time diffusion, identity consciousness, social isolation, work paralysis, bi-sexual diffusion and diffusion of ideals (Maier, 1964, p.63-4). From this perspective, it would appear that these psycho-social tasks are universal. However, it can be argued that there are significant variations in the "adolescent experience" of differing social, economic and cultural groups.

(3) **Factors Affecting the General Experience of Adolescence.**

(i) **Socio Economic Factors.** While the broad biological processes of physical maturation are universal, the socio-cultural interpretation of this phenomenon differs widely between and within societies. The turbulence, indecisions and oscillation of mood and behavior which is still widely seen as characteristic of adolescence in a Western industrial society may be contrasted with the claim made by cultural anthropologists such as Margaret Mead that adolescence in some non-Western, non-industrialized societies appears to be a largely untroubled and carefree experience (Mead, 1963). This discrepancy in perspective draws attention to industrialization as a socio-economic factor which appears to significantly influence the course of adolescence. The economic surplus produced by an industrialized economy enables the society to prolong the period of non-productive financial dependence of the child upon his parents, particularly through the process of formal education. Thus while biological maturation proceeds, psychosocial development may be impeded. Further, the diversity of role specialization within a modern economy also serves to provide adolescents with a much wider an rapidly changing range of choice of identifications and values. In Erikson's words

> ". . . the sense of ego identity, then, became more necessary (and more problematical) whenever a wider range of activities in envisaged". (Erikson, 1965, p.13)

(ii) **Socio-Cultural Factors.** The general experience of adolescence differs widely even within the broad category of Western industrialized societies. For example, while American social values generally place considerable emphasis on the adolescent developing an indepen-

dent and innovative approach to meeting life challenges, the European adolescent is generally given much more support in these endeavours by the availability of a clearly delineated and respected socio-cultural tradition which provides guidelines for identity formation. (McNassor, 1967). The experience of adolescence in such societies may also be compared to that of the United States in terms of what Ruth Benedict (1938) identified as "continuities and discontinuities in cultural conditioning". While responsibility, dominance and sexual assertiveness are associated with the parent role in American society, the child is expected to occupy a non-responsible status and to be both "sexless" and submissive. Thus adolescence, as the process of changing groups (Lewin) must necessarily involve rejection of some areas of earlier socialization and the learning of the opposite forms of behaviour which are now redefined as socially appropriate. For the European adolescent, on the other hand, growing up is considered to be part of a continuous process of training in the habits of the older generation, with a number of social institutions, such as non age segregated recreational activities, facilitating the movement of the adolescent into the social world of adults.

Two further qualifications may be made. Location with a particular society may affect the experience of adolescence. Young people growing up in a rural agrarian community may face task-forms of socialization which differ markedly from those of their urban counterparts. Second, the socio-cultural world of the urban adolescent may reflect the influence of American-inspired, media-propagated stereotypes of adolescents. Identification with this internationalized view of adolescence American-style will be partly dependent by the adolescent's ability to obtain some of the expensive material symbols of this "teenage culture".

A final major qualification of the adolescent experience may be made in terms of the distinction drawn between male and female adolescents. While recognition of the boy's growing desire for autonomy is offered by most societies, similar recognition is not given to the girl, whose role options are usually predetermined to a much greater extent. Thus, in the girl's struggle to attain ego identity she may find herself much more a "captive of her culture" than her brother.

In summary, the adolescent, in his passage between childhood and adulthood must successfully complete a number of interrelated bio-psycholocial tasks to reach his goal of ego identity. There are significant differences both between and within societies in the way in which these tasks are understood and in the amount of societal support available to the adolescent in his endeavours to establish himself as an accepted and respected member of his social world. Attention is now turned to an examination of some of the problems which can arise when the bio-psychosocial tasks of adolescence must be achieved concurrently with the task of adjusting to the two, often conflicting, social worlds of the ethnic minority group and that of the dominant cultural majority.

Culture Conflict and Identity Formation

The culture conflict experienced by adolescent members of an immigrant minority group is often seen by members of the majority group as "caused" by the stubborn refusal of immigrant parents to acknowledge or approve what is assumed to be their children's burning desire to renounce their ethnicity and join the cultural majority. Besides being largely inaccurate, this conception ignores the complexity of the culture conflict phenomenon, which involves many factors, including parent child relationships within the immigrant family, the effect of ethnic minority experience upon ego formation and the pattern of interaction between minority and majority groups. It also makes the unwarranted assumption that the majority group culture is inherently more appealing to an immigrant child than that of his ethnic group, and further, that these two cultures must necessarily be in conflict. These factors and assumptions require closer consideration.

As noted by Stamm (1961) ego development is both a maturational and learning process. In the following discussion of identity formation, attention will be mainly limited to the "learning" aspects. The immigrant adolescent's identity formation is influenced by a broad number of factors, including:
(1) the degree of success in achieving preceding psychosocial tasks and the quality of the early parent-child relationship;
(2) the parent-adolescent relationship and the compatibility of minority/majority value systems;
(3) the influence of other peoples' reactions as the "looking glass" self together with the experience of "taking the role of the other" in shaping the development of a positive, comfortable self-image;
(4) the establishment of a realistic, potentially attainable ego ideal.

Significance of Epigenetic Psychosocial Development and Parent-Child Relationships.

A child's successful establishment of a sense of basic trust, a sense of autonomy and later, of initiative and industry may be adversely affected by factors such as:
(i) his parents' general reaction to the experience of migration;
(ii) the socio-economic vicissitudes which beset many migrant families, particularly in their early years in Australia;

(iii) the child's early school experiences which presents both (a) a new set of challenges and tasks for which the child from a non-English speaking home may be ill-equipped linguistically, with consequent failure damaging the child's self-respect and confidence and (b) a more general first experience with a socio-cultural environment which differs significantly from the immigrant child's former world of family and kin.

(1) **Parental Adaptation:** While migration necessarily involves a process of adaptation, the form of this adjustment is influenced by (a) reasons for immigration (through choice or through exile) and related perspectives on both the old and new environments, (b) level of attainment of the goals which prompted "voluntary" migration and (c) the success in establishing a satisfying personal, family and social life in the new environment. Parents' pre-migration experience of war, deprivation or oppression and discrimination may have adversely affected their personality development and their capacity to build satisfying relationships both within and beyond their families. Those immigrant parents who see migration as exile or their residence as only temporary may exhibit an ambivalence towards the new country which causes anxiety and confusion in their children. (Triseliotis, 1970). This ambivalence may lead them to consciously or unconsciously hinder their children's attempts to be part of the new society. (Rex, 1971). Children may also feel guilty that while they may be finding the new world exciting and pleasurable, their parents are lonely, homesick, isolated and depressed about the family's future.

(2) **Economic Hardship:** The economic hardship which is often involved in the physical re-establishment of the family in a new country may effect that family in many ways. Despite the high proportion of migrant women who are forced to join the workforce, child-care facilities are grossly inadequate. The lack of access for many migrants to all but the most poorly paid, repetitive and often dangerous jobs, the high cost of accommodation and services, and lack of knowledge of social welfare services and entitlements represent areas of deprivation which effect the whole family. (Snyder, 1976). Socio-economic conditions also impinge upon the family through forcing role redefinition which transforms internal family structure in a process which may generate role ambiguity, confusion and general family tension. (Zubrzycki, 1966). In short, parental efforts to establish the family's financial security may mean that the general emotional climate within the home as well as transactions between parent and child are adversely affected by parents being tired, frustrated, anxious and temporarily pre-occupied with material matters.

(3) **The School Experience:** School for many immigrant children represents overcrowded and dilapidated buildings, large classes, very little room to play and contact with a new group of both children and adults whose view of the appropriate may be very different if not diamentrically opposed to those previously inculcated by parents and kin. A distaste for either the world of home or school, accompanied by a good deal of confusion and self-doubt. These feelings of inadequacy may be further heightened by experience of academic difficulty and failure.

The Parent-Adolescent Relationship and Value-clash

The immigrant parent-adolescent relationship, partly already shaped by the factors outlined above, may also be influenced by:
(i) the development of family relationships in the new environment;
(ii) Parental expectation that the adolescent will continue to identify strongly with the ethnic culture;
(iii) parental expectation of high academic achievement.

(1) **Family Relationships:** Feeling threatened by his low socio-economic status and role confustion, the immigrant parent may become more authoritarian and demand greater obedience in an effort to reinstate his prerogative. (Triseliotis, 1970). This tends to make adolescent identification with the parent harder and leads to feelings of mutual frustration and resentment. Tension may also be heightened within the family by difficulties in communication. The adolescent's attempts to convey complex or abstract thoughts through a limited command of his parent's native tongue may be unsuccessful, while parental command of English is similarly inadequate to bridge the linguistic gap. Difficulties in communication may also serve to exacerbate the loneliness and unhappiness of immigrant women, especially those who are housebound. (Reeves, 1973). Thus the adolescent's access to this source of effective support may be reduced.

Intergenerational problems may also arise when immigrant parents attempt to "set limits" which are primarily based on their experience of adolescence, some decades ago, in the old country. These are often rejected by their children as out-of-date and culturally irrelevant to the new environment. This conflict coincides with the adolescent demand for more freedom of choice and action. In the Australian context many immigrant parents, noting with disapproval what they interpret as a general laxity in the Anglo-Saxon majority's control and guidance of their young people, are fearful of allowing their children greater autonomy. The issue of tertiary education for girls often produces such a confrontation with parental fears of the alienating in-

fluence of the new society conflicting with adolescent hopes for the development of their individual potential.

(ii) **Identification with the Ethnic Culture.** Increased antagonism between parent and child may result from parental pressure on the adolescent to publicly identify with the ethnic culture to reflect credit on the family and enhance marriage prospects. Concurrently the adolescent may be subject so similar but opposing forces emanating from the Anglo-Saxon school and peer-group environment.

(iii) **Parental Education Expections.** Another source of intra-family tension may be in the parental desire and ambition that the child achieve academic excellence. (Two Worlds, 1971). This parental goal may not take into account the varying quality of the educational experience available to adolescents in different parts of the city, nor give full recognition to the interests and capacity of the particular adolescent. (Vassiliou, n.d.). Failure to meet parental expectation may then result in feelings of guilt and worthlessness (Triseliotis, 1970) which hamper the overall achievement of ego identity.

Influence of Societal Reaction

The problem of divergent socio-cultural "reference points" is of major significance in the adolescent's attempts to establish a view of himself which is confirmed by society. The reaction of others — Caoley's "looking-glass self" (Gittler, p.130) — may differ from ethnic group to wider society, forcing the individual to make a choice between the alternative views. The problem of choice is heightened in a society such as Australia where, generally, ethnicity is devalued and the concept of a multi-cultural society rejected. Similarly George Mead's view that we know ourselves only through "taking the role of the other" and later internalizing societal norms and standards by "taking the role of the generalized other" (Gittler, p.130) draws attention to the confusion which may result when the "generalized" other may be composed of two separate value and belief systems. Identification with one group may call forth rejection from the other group.

Establishment of an Ego-Ideal

Membership of "two worlds" may similarly affect the establishment of an "ego-ideal", or in Freudian terms, the formation of identification with significant others, followed by imitation of their values and attitudes. Partial assimilation of majority group values, including awareness of negative ethnic stereotypes, may lead the adolescent to reject the devalue ethnic prestige models. (Parker, 1964). Rejection of the ethnic culture may also be based on equation of parental restrictiveness with ethnicity. On the other hand, identification with a majority group-influenced ego ideal may require rejection of personal history and socialization, relationships with significant others at the family and ethnic group level and the adoption of a new set of personal relationships and reality definitions. At a time of general ego vulnerability, the strain imposed by this attempted transition may by enormous.

Qualification of "Culture Conflict"

A number of comments must be made to qualify the view of culture conflict just presented.

(1) The phenomenon of culture conflict when defined as "the condition in which an individual finds himself in conflict over the differences in value orientations and behavioral norms demanded by his ethnic heritage and the dominant cultural setting in which he lives" (Okano and Spilka, 1971, p.274) may effect adult as well as adolescent. Thus it may be hypothesized that some immigrant parents react harshly to their children's cultural confusion in an attempt to deny their own insecurity.

(2) The depth of the culture conflict will be influenced (a) by the sharpness of contrast between the two systems and (b) the extent of common ground between the two groups. For example, the generally greater speed and ease of adaptation to life in Australia by German as opposed to Polish immigrants noted by Johnson (1972) may be related to the relative similarity of these two cultures to Anglo-Saxon culture.

(3) It must not be overlooked that most immigrants anticipate that adaptation will be both necessary and inevitable. Thus significant changes in areas such as family roles may be accepted without generating overwhelming conflict. In this context, generalizations relating to the patriarchical, extended Greek rural family of two decades ago may bear little resemblance to the nuclear family patterns of role and decision-sharing which is emerging in many Greek families in Australia. (Bottomley, 1974).

(4) Culture conflict has often been seen as producing a "marginal man" who neither belongs nor is accepted by either cultural group. However, sufficient "marginal men" may represent a incipient "marginal culture" with a stable and well-integrated culture identity. Patterns of Jewish life and culture may provide an illustrative example. (Goldberg, 1941). It has been suggested (Cox, 1974), that an Australian-Greek identity may be emerging, and this can be seen as something akin to a hybrid marginal culture. If this is so, the "culture conflict" problem may take on reduced and altered dimensions.

(5) It has been suggested that the likelihood of culture clash in adolescence may be reduced by successful "mastery" of the ethnic culture in childhood. (Derbyshire, 1970). Similarly those parents who are fully at ease with their ethnic identity in the Australian situation

may provide a role model which helps their children to form a positive self-image.

(6) It appears that the majority of immigrant adolescents and their families manage to reach some workable compromise over culture conflict issues so that stress does not develop into conflict. (Connell, **et. al.**, 1975), (**'Survey of Youth'**). Further, ambivalence is not the only result of the "two-world" situation — many adolescents identify strongly with their ethnic culture experiences very little conflict. Others have their parents' approval to become "Australians" as rapidly as possible, so that their conflict, too, is likely to be lessened.

In summary, the immigrant adolescent's successful achievement of the developmental task of identity formation is complicated by a number of factors. These relate basically to (a) achieveing psychosocial growth within a family system which may have adversely been affected by the migration experience and (b) to developing a sense of self-respect and a positive self-image in a situation of socialization into two worlds, whose values may be mutually contradictory. Culture conflict can take many forms, with varying degrees of intensity, and is overcome in many families through compromise and mutual adaptation. Thus social work concern lies with those parents and adolescents who, for a number of reasons such as those suggested earlier, cannot reach this point of compromise independently.

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