

# Gender Roles in Immigrant Families: Parenting Views, Practices, and Child Development

Susan S. Chuang · Catherine Tamis-LeMonda

Published online: 21 March 2009  
© Springer Science + Business Media, LLC 2009

**Abstract** Ecological and acculturation frameworks are especially central to understanding the experiences of immigrant populations and to date, current research has yielded new conceptual and methodological tools for documenting the cultural and developmental processes of children and their families. This special issue of 12 articles focuses on immigrant families and the importance of gender along various dimensions: parental roles, parent–child relationships, child outcomes. The collection of articles also represents various innovative methodologies used, including quantitative and qualitative approaches.

**Keywords** Parenting · Fathering · Immigration · Acculturation · Parent–child relationships · Culture

## Introduction

The influx of new groups of immigrants to countries around the world has transformed the demographic landscape of many nations. Such significant demographic changes can have important implications to the country's political, economic, and social policy decisions. However, little is known about the family dynamics and functioning among immigrant families, with even less on the roles of gender. This special issue includes 12 studies that addresses these

issues, investigating how gender interplays with parental roles, parent–child relationships, and child outcomes.

According to the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development 2005 (Factbook 2008), the foreign-born populations of Canada and the United States are 19.1% and 12.9%, respectively. Other countries also have similar immigrant demographics such as Belgium with 12.9% (Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2005). According to Statistics Canada 2006, Asians one of the fastest growing ethnic groups (including Chinese, Koreans, Japanese, Southwest Asians, and Filipinos), accounting for 1.1 million people in Canada. Significant growth trends are also evident in the United States as individuals from Latin America (53.3%) and Asia (25.0%) dominate the immigrant population (U.S. Census Bureau 2003).

Researchers recognize that theoretical frameworks and models of child development and family dynamics have historically overlooked the ways in which developmental processes are shaped by socio-cultural contexts (e.g., see Chuang and Moreno 2008). Ecological and acculturation frameworks are especially central to understanding the experiences of immigrant populations (e.g., see Phinney 2006; Portes and Rumbaut 2001), and current research has yielded new conceptual and methodological tools for documenting the cultural and developmental processes of children and their families. Within this broad arena, a question of central importance is on how gender roles in immigrant families play out in the lives of children and families. This overarching theme of gender provides the framework for this special issue, *From Shore to Shore: Immigrant Fathers, Mothers, and Children*, which presents current research on gender and gender roles in immigrant families at individual and familial levels.

To date, since Asians and Latinos are one of the fastest growing immigrant populations in both Canada and the

---

S. S. Chuang (✉)  
University of Guelph,  
Guelph, Canada  
e-mail: schuang@uoguelph.ca

C. Tamis-LeMonda  
New York University,  
New York, NY, USA

United States (e.g., for overview, see Cabrera et al. 2009; Chuang and Su 2009; Tamis-LeMonda et al. 2009), the limited field on gender and immigration has primarily focused on Asian and Latino families (e.g., Chuang and Moreno 2008). However, in this special issue, we take a more global approach by including research on immigrant and refugee families from Sudan, Hmong, Cuba, Turks in Belgium, China, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic. Additionally, the various studies span research from infancy through adulthood and apply diverse methodologies ranging from quantitative analyses on large-scale national studies to qualitative research that deeply probe into individuals' perceptions about gender roles and the immigration experience. This rich collection of papers is organized into two main sections: 1) fathering roles and involvement, and 2) parenting practices, parent–child relationships, and child socialization processes.

### Fathering Roles and Father Involvement

The first section of the special issue includes six papers (Cabrera et al. 2009; Chuang and Su 2009; Este and Tashble 2009; Pinto and Coltrane 2009; Qin 2009; Tamis-LeMonda et al. 2009) that focus on fathering roles and father involvement in various immigrant families. The first two papers highlight the challenges parents faced as they immigrated to a new country, Canada and the United States. Este and Tachble's (2009) paper, *Fatherhood in the Canadian Context: Perceptions and Experiences of Sudanese Refugee Men*, examines how Sudanese refugee Canadian men perceive and experience their lives as men and fathers as they acculturate to the Canadian context. Fathers described their roles of provider, teacher, the importance of customs and traditions to guide their behaviors, and the value of respect and education. Some fathers also talked about the importance of giving back to the community. However, the immigration experience was also discussed in terms of the challenges they faced in unemployment, discrimination, fears of their children losing their cultural heritage, and social isolation. Many fathers also stated the difficulty in disciplining their children in a Canadian society where children possessed more rights than they had in their native country. Similarly, in Qin's (2009) paper, *Gendered Processes of Adaptation: Understanding Parent–Child Relations in Chinese Immigrant Families*, focus is on the adjustments of Chinese mothers and fathers shortly after immigrating to the United States, and the meanings of these challenges for the parent–adolescent relationship. Parents uniformly spoke of the difficulties of adjusting to a new country, especially fathers who often lost status in their employment after

immigrating, which in turn, created greater challenges to their involvement (physical and psychological) with their children. The perceptions of both parents and children about parenting roles influenced parents' levels of stress and feelings of alienation, and adolescents often expressed a sense of emotional disconnect from their parents as they themselves adjusted a new cultural context.

Pinto and Coltrane's (2009) study, *Divisions of labor in Mexican Immigrant Families: Structure and Culture*, examines how Mexican immigrant, Mexican American, and Anglo American mothers and fathers divide and/or share household responsibilities. Contrary to cultural beliefs about household labor among Mexican families, both groups of Mexican families were generally similar to Anglo Americans in that practical demands (e.g., time constraints) largely influenced parents' division of household labor. Although Mexican immigrants held more conventional gender ideals and attitudes than Mexican Americans and Anglo Americans, other factors such as mothers' earnings and household compositions had a greater effect on division of labor within families.

Tamis-LeMonda et al.'s (2009) paper, *Father Involvement in Immigrant and Ethnically Diverse Families from the Prenatal Period to the Second Year: Prediction and Mediating Mechanisms*, focused on the fathering behaviors during the prenatal period and across infants' first year of life in various ethnic families. Little is known about fathers' prenatal behaviors, whether these behaviors predict future father involvement, and if so, through which pathways prenatal involvement matters for continued father involvement. Tamis-LeMonda and colleagues reported that levels of prenatal father involvement were similarly high across the three ethnic groups, Mexican, Dominican, and African American (e.g., feeling the baby moving), although some behaviors such as hospital visitation differed by ethnicity. As expected, prenatal involvement predicted fathers' postnatal involvement, and one central mediator of such associations was the quality of the mother–father relationship. Both father ethnicity and father residency moderated associations between fathers' prenatal behaviors and later father involvement in all groups.

Extending the understanding of immigrant Mexican families of infants, Cabrera et al.'s (2009) paper, *Mexican American Mothers' and Fathers' Prenatal Attitudes and Father Prenatal Involvement: Links to Mother–Infant Interaction and Father Engagement*, focuses on parents' intentionality around the pregnancy. Using a national dataset, Early Childhood Longitudinal Study—Birth Cohort, Cabrera and colleagues find that the majority of Mexican parents reported wanting the pregnancy, a rate that is much higher than the national average (Finer and Henshaw 2006). Within the Mexican immigrant population, pregnancy intentions predicted fathers' involvement with their infants, but

disagreements among couples and their perceptions of relationship quality moderated these associations.

Chuang and Su's (2009) paper, *Says Who?: Decision-Making and Conflicts among Chinese-Canadian and Mainland Chinese Parents of Young Children*, extends the literature on child care responsibilities among immigrant and native Chinese parents. Although substantial research exists on parenting behaviors in infancy, little is known about the process of how parents make decisions about the caring of their infant (e.g., who makes the decisions). Contrary to the belief that Chinese fathers may be relatively un-involved in care of their infants, regardless of country, parents used various common strategies to make decisions about the general care of their infants, including letting mothers take the lead in decisions, engaging in joint decision-making, taking the child's interest into consideration, and seeking advice from extended families and professionals. Nonetheless, differences in these processes were also evident by gender of parent and country, particularly in terms of how decisions were made and the types of conflicts that existed around such decisions.

### Parenting Practices, Parent–Child Relationships, and Child Socialization Processes

The six papers of the second section (Crockett et al. 2009; Dumka et al. 2009; Gungor and Bornstein 2009; Koh et al. 2009; Lee et al. 2009; Updegraff et al. 2009) focus on the influences of mothers' and fathers' parenting practices and the parent–child relationship on children's well being and development in various immigrant and ethnic minority families.

Gungor and Bornstein's (2009) paper, *Gender, Development, Values, Adaptation, and Discrimination in Acculturating Adolescents: The Case of Turk Heritage Youth Born and Living in Belgium*, investigates the ways in which young and older adolescents perceive values, adaptation, and discrimination, and the role of gender in these perceptions. Their study advances an understanding of the complexities of acculturation by describing the ways that adolescents navigate between their two cultures in both their private and public lives, and how gender creates divergent paths of acculturation for adolescent girls and boys. Gender and developmental differences were found in adolescents' adjustment in their private and public lives (e.g., older girls reported being more "Belgian" than older boys). Exposure to discriminatory treatment also differed by gender, with boys being more likely to perceive themselves as targets of racism than girls.

Lee et al.'s (2009) paper, *The Family Life and Adjustment of Hmong American Sons and Daughters*, examines intergenerational conflict between Hmong parents and adoles-

cents in relation to adolescents' psychological and academic adjustment to college. Little is known about the family dynamics among Hmong, and this paper focuses on the intergenerational conflicts among parents and their college-aged children. Contrary to expectations, parents' levels of conflicts with their daughters did not significantly differ from conflicts with their sons. However, the effects of adolescents' intergenerational conflicts with their parents differed for daughters and sons. For example, Hmong American women reported greater use of alcohol when they reported higher levels of conflicts with their parents whereas intergenerational conflicts for men revealed positive outcomes such as increased college retention in their first year.

Extending an understanding of intergenerational conflicts, Updegraff et al.'s (2009) paper, *Exploring Mothers' and Fathers' Relationships with Sons versus Daughters: Links to Adolescent Adjustment in Mexican Immigrant Families*, also examines gender dynamics and family socialization processes among mothers and fathers in relation to youth adjustment. Among these Mexican immigrant families, mothers and fathers differed on their perceptions of their relationships with their adolescents (e.g., warmth, acceptance, knowledge of daily activities). Mothers and fathers also differed in their ratings of their knowledge about their adolescents' daily activities and the amount of time spent in shared activities with their adolescents. Mothers also reported spending more time with their daughters than with their sons. Differences between daughters and sons on relationship issues were also linked to parents' division of labor.

Complementing these intergenerational studies is Crockett et al.'s (2009) paper, *Conceptions of Good Parent–Adolescent Relationships among Cuban American Teenagers*. The authors investigate the role of culture on adolescents' conceptions of positive relationships with mothers and fathers. Findings revealed that adolescent boys and girls defined "good relationship" with a parent differently and gender differences were also found by parent. The gender dynamics among dyads (mother–daughter, mother–son, father–daughter, father–son) were complex and placed within a Cuban context of expected family roles of mothers and fathers (e.g., mothers were involved in daily activities, fathers were available).

Dumka et al.'s (2009) paper, *Academic Success of Mexican Origin Adolescent Boys and Girls: The Role of Mothers' and Fathers' Parenting and Cultural Orientation*, further extends our knowledge about acculturation and immigrant families. They examine the cultural orientations (acculturation, enculturation) and practices of mothers and fathers of adolescents, and examined the ways in which these cultural processes influence adolescents' academic development and adjustment to school. They show that gender plays

a significant role in the degree to which mothers' and fathers' parenting and cultural orientation influence their sons' and daughters' academic success. For example, mothers' parenting significantly influenced their sons' and daughters' academic performance, however, only fathers' parenting role was linked to their son's academic outcome.

The final paper by Koh et al. (2009), *Father, Mother and Me: Parental Value Orientations and Child Self-identity in Asian American Immigrants*, applies an innovative method to examining associations between parents' value orientations and child self identity in Chinese and Korean families of second-generation American youth. Linking themes between parents' and personal life stories, parents reported to uphold Confucian values that were associated with adolescents' sense of an autonomous self in areas of achievement, but a sense of a relational self in areas of social relationships. However, the associations between parent value association and adolescent' self-identity differed by parent and child gender (e.g., with associations stronger for boys than for girls). These findings indicate that East Asian mothers and fathers play different roles in the adolescent development of self-identity in achievement and relational domains, and that sons respond differently than daughters to their parents' value orientations.

The concluding paper by Lamb and Bougher (2009), *How Does Migration Affect Mothers' and Fathers' Roles within Their Families? Reflections on Some Recent Research*, provides an integrated view of how gender and age are examined in relation to immigration and settlement. Examining the 12 studies as a collective whole, Lamb and Bougher provide insight into the points of connection as well as the points of variability. Through their critical analyses of the 12 studies, Lamb and Bougher offer additional insight into the findings, bringing to our attention that much more work in this field is needed. Suggestions for future research to provide greater clarity to the immigrant process and its influence on individuals and families have been discussed.

In closing, the set of 12 papers that comprise this special issue advance the literature on the intersection between gender and immigration in several core ways. They advance an understanding on immigrant parents' roles in the family system, and how parents negotiate these decisions and roles in areas ranging from intentions around pregnancy, care of infants, fathers' social play and involvement in their young infants' lives, and decisions around household responsibilities. They describe the experiences of mothers, fathers, and children around the process of immigration and adjustment to a new land, and show the ways that both parent and child gender influence these adjustments as well as moderate associations between parenting values, views, and practices and children's adjustment and academic outcomes. Finally,

beyond the specific contributions made by each paper in terms of research findings, this collection demonstrates the rich variety of methods that can be applied to the study of gender and immigration, drawn from quantitative and qualitative traditions as well as the blending of both.

## References

- Cabrera, N., Shannon, J., Mitchell, S.J., & West, J. (2009). Mexican American mothers' and fathers' prenatal attitudes and father prenatal involvement: Links to mother–infant interaction and father engagement. *Sex Roles*, this issue.
- Chuang, S. S., & Moreno, R. P. (2008). *On New Shores: Understanding immigrant fathers in North America*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Chuang, S. S., & Su, Y. (2009). Says who? Decision-making and conflicts among Chinese-Canadian and mainland Chinese parents of young children. *Sex Roles*, this issue.
- Crockett, L. J., Brown, J., Iturbide, M. I., Russell, S. T., & Wilkinson-Lee, A. (2009). Conceptions of good parent-adolescent relationships among Cuban American teenagers. *Sex Roles*, this issue.
- Dumka, L. E., Gonzales, N. A., Bonds, D. D., & Millsap, R. E. (2009). Academic success in Mexican origin adolescent boys and girls: The role of mothers' and fathers' parenting and cultural orientation. *Sex Roles*, this issue.
- Este, D., & Tachble, A. (2009). Fatherhood in the Canadian context: Perceptions and experiences of Sudanese refugee men. *Sex Roles*, this issue.
- Factbook, O. E. C. D. (2008). Economic, environmental, and social statistics. Retrieved on November 25, 2008 at <http://stats.oecd.org/wbos/viewhtml.aspx?queryname=464&type=view&lang=en>.
- Finer, L., & Henshaw, S. K. (2006). Disparities in rates of unintended pregnancy in the United States, 1994 and 2001. *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, 38, 90–96.
- Güngör, D., & Bornstein, M. H. (2009). Gender, development, values, adaptation, and discrimination in acculturating adolescents: The case of Turk heritage youth born and living in Belgium. *Sex Roles*, this issue.
- Koh, J. B. K., Shao, Y., & Wang, Q. (2009). Father, mother and me: Parental value orientations and child self-identity in Asian American immigrants. *Sex Roles*, this issue.
- Lamb, M. E., & Bougher, L. D. (2009). How does migration affect mothers' and fathers' roles within their families? Reflections on some recent research. *Sex Roles*, this issue.
- Lee, R. M., Jung, K. R., Su, J. C., Tran, A. G. T. T., & Bahrassa, N. (2009). The family life and adjustment of Hmong American sons and daughters. *Sex Roles*, this issue.
- Phinney, J. S. (2006). Acculturation is not an independent variable: Approaches to studying acculturation as a complex process. In M. H. Bornstein, & L. R. Cote (Eds.), *Acculturation and parent–child relationships: Measurement and development* (pp. 79–95). Mahwah: Erlbaum.
- Pinto, K. M., & Coltrane, S. (2009). Divisions of labor in Mexican immigrant families: Structure and culture. *Sex Roles*, this issue.
- Portes, A., & Rumbaut, R. G. (2001). *Legacies: the story of the immigrant second generation*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Qin, D. B. (2009). Gendered processes of adaptation: Understanding parent–child relations in Chinese immigrant families. *Sex Roles*, this issue.
- Statistics Canada. (2006). *The Daily: 2006 Census: Immigration, citizenship, language, mobility and migration*. Retrieved January 14, 2008 from <http://www.statcan.ca/Daily/English/071204/d071204a.htm>.

- Tamis-LeMonda, C. S., Kahana-Kalman, R., & Yoshikawa, H. (2009). Father involvement in immigrant family and ethnically diverse families from the prenatal period to the second year: Prediction and mediating mechanisms. *Sex Roles*, this issue.
- Updegraff, K. A., Delgado, M. Y., & Wheeler, L. A. (2009). Exploring mothers' and fathers' relationships with sons versus daughters: Links to adolescent adjustment in Mexican immigrant families. *Sex Roles*, this issue.
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2003). *2002 Economics and statistics census, The Hispanic population in the United States*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. Retrieved March 19, 2008 from <http://www.census.gov/prod/2003pubs/p20-545.pdf>.

Copyright of *Sex Roles* is the property of Springer Science & Business Media B.V. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.