INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONS IN IMMIGRANT FAMILIES: ROLE REVERSAL, INDIVIDUATION, AND PARENTING REPRESENTATIONS

Oznobishin O., Kurman J.

Department of Psychology, University of Haifa, Haifa, Israel

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Parent-child role reversal, when a child assumes functions in the relationship usually assumed by the parent, is a common phenomenon in immigrant families; however, its long-term implications are yet not fully understood. The aim of this study was to investigate intergenerational transmission of role reversal among immigrant families from the former Soviet Union in Israel, using both quantitative and qualitative methods. In the first stage, the association between role reversal and individuation was examined among 150 immigrants, aged 19 to 35 years, compared to 73 young adults living in Russia. Participants reported their childhood relationships with parents (parental care and autonomy encouragement), family obligations (instrumental and emotional roles, as well as perceived unfairness), and current individuation from the family (conflictual independence, emotional cutoff, and fusion with others). Immigrant participants also reported language and culture brokering roles – transplanting and interpreting the new language and culture for their parents. Immigrants revealed a higher level of role reversal than their nonimmigrant counterparts, which was related to poor individuation. In the second stage, 50 immigrant mothers of young children were administered the Parenting Representations Interview (Scharf & Mayseless, 2002). Adopting parental roles in the family of origin, including roles specific to immigration, predicted mothers’ role reversal and negative emotions in the relationship with their child. Low levels of individuation were associated with role reversal and inappropriate boundaries with the child. These findings demonstrate intergenerational transmission of role reversal for the first time in the context of immigration. Case examples of such transmission are presented.