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## Personality and Social Sciences

# The adaptation of non-western and Muslim immigrant adolescents in the Netherlands: An immigrant paradox?

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This article addresses the possible existence of an immigrant paradox in a sample of immigrant adolescents attending vocational schools in the Netherlands. An immigrant paradox is the finding that first generation immigrants show a more positive pattern of adaptation than nationals despite poorer economic conditions. Second generation immigrants regress to the nationals in terms of adaptation. A sample of 152 first generation immigrant adolescents, 285 second generation immigrant adolescents and 406 national adolescents completed self-reports about socio-economic status, psychological problems, behavioral problems and self-esteem. The results supported the existence of an immigrant paradox in this sample. This indicates that further assimilation among immigrant adolescents does not necessarily lead to increased well being.

**Key words:** Immigrant paradox, adaptation, immigrant youth.

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## INTRODUCTION

Even though immigrant adolescents usually live in poor socio-economic circumstances (Beiser, Hou, Hyman & Tousignant, 2002; Hernandez & Darke, 1999), which is generally found to have an adverse effect on the development of children (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002) many studies from Canada and the United States suggest that immigrant adolescents do not fare worse than national adolescents and may even do better in terms of adaptation. When compared to their national contemporaries, immigrant adolescents have been found to receive higher grades, have fewer psychological and health problems, are less likely to use drugs or alcohol, and engage in delinquent acts less often (e.g. Fuligni, 1997; Harris, 2000; Steinberg, 1996). The recurrent finding that immigrant adolescents have a superior pattern of adaptation when compared to nationals despite a lower socioeconomic status has been labeled the “immigrant paradox” (Garcia-Coll, 2005).

Further studies on the adaptation of immigrant adolescents suggest that increased assimilation may be related to poorer adaptation outcomes. Studies in the United States (Harker, 2001) and Canada (Beiser *et al.*, 2002), report that the first-generation immigrants indeed show a more positive pattern of adaptation than the nationals, but the second generation regresses to the nationals’ standard. Based on an extensive literature review, Sam, Vedder, Liebkind, Neto, and Virta (2008) argued that the criteria for deciding what is to be labeled as an immigrant paradox are not equally clear in all studies that pretend to study this paradox. They suggest taking a conservative stance on the immigrant paradox. Not only do immigrants need to show a more positive pattern of adaptation despite a lower socioeconomic status, it also

has to be found that further assimilation leads to poorer adaptation outcomes. Even by these strict criteria the existence of an immigrant paradox in Canada and the United States is well documented. In Europe, however, there are far fewer studies concerning the immigrant paradox, let alone studies that show its existence.

### *An immigrant paradox in Europe*

Studies about a possible immigrant paradox in European countries may be scarce, but there are studies that, although not set up to analyze an immigrant paradox, suggest that immigrants in European countries also have an adaptation pattern similar to an immigrant paradox. For instance, in Sweden it was found that immigrant adolescents from the Middle East were less likely to smoke, drink alcohol or use marihuana when compared to Swedish adolescents (Holmberg & Hellberg, 2008). Another example is a study comparing Bosnian adolescent refugees in Slovenia with Slovenian adolescents that indicated that despite traumatic experiences, Bosnian refugee adolescents experienced lower depression, a lower desire for suicide, and a higher self-esteem than Slovenian adolescents (Slodnjak, Kos & Yule, 2002). Although these studies indicate that in some European countries immigrant adolescents may experience a more positive pattern of adaptation than national adolescents, they do not show the second generation decline, a key aspect of the immigrant paradox.

Sam *et al.* (2008) have conducted a more systematic study to analyze the existence of an immigrant paradox in Europe. Using data from Sweden, Finland, Norway, Portugal and the Netherlands they were only able to find partial support for the immigrant paradox. There was an immigrant paradox in terms of sociocultural adaptation

(i.e. school adjustment and behavioral problems), but not in terms of psychological adaptation (i.e. self-esteem, life satisfaction and psychological problems). The data for Finland and Sweden were separately analyzed, and showed a similar pattern. As there was only a small subsample of immigrant adolescents from the Netherlands, the Netherlands were not separately analyzed. In this study we will test whether and to what extent the adaptation of immigrant adolescents in the Netherlands is supportive of an immigrant paradox pattern.

#### *The current study*

In this study the adaptation of immigrant adolescents in junior vocational education in the Netherlands is addressed. We choose to use the variables psychological problems, self-esteem and behavioral problems for this study, as these variables have been often used in studies concerning the immigrant paradox (e.g. Harker, 2001; Sam *et al.*, 2008; Slodnjak, Kos & Yule, 2002) and as such using these variables will make it possible to compare the results in this study to an already well-established body of literature.

We focus specifically on immigrant adolescents in junior vocational education as these youths have poor socioeconomic status in comparison to their national peers, and relatively poor chances of economic upward mobility, as junior vocational education is the lowest regular academic track in the Netherlands. Moreover, most immigrant adolescents in the Netherlands attend junior vocational education (Herweijer, 2009). A study of the immigrant paradox in the Netherlands may further increase the generalizability of the immigrant paradox among countries, as the Netherlands differs from both the United States and other European countries in both multicultural policies (Banting & Kymlicka, 2004) and welfare policies (Gustafsson & Stafford, 1994). We excluded western immigrants, mostly from other EU-countries, from the study, because they share many cultural characteristics with national Dutch adolescents. A comparison between nationals, first-generation non-western immigrant adolescents, and second-generation non-western immigrant adolescents will reveal the extent to which the adaptation of non-western immigrant adolescents in the Netherlands resembles an immigrant paradox. Given previous results that generally supported the existence of an immigrant paradox in European countries, we expect to find an immigrant paradox pattern in the Netherlands.

In this study, a separate subsample of immigrant adolescents with a Muslim background will be analyzed. As many as one in two Dutch national adolescents reports having negative feelings towards Muslims (Gonzalez, Verkuyten, Weesie & Poppe, 2008), and of all ethnic groups in the Netherlands, Muslims are most likely to be the victims of racist violence (Wagenaar & Van Donselaar, 2008). Not only do Muslim adolescents often live in poor socioeconomic conditions, they are in a country where the national population treats them as hostile. This group, due to their double disadvantage of growing up predominantly in families with a low socioeconomic status and being a group encountering prejudice and discrimination in the Dutch society, is particularly interesting for testing the immigrant paradox. As immigrant adolescents have been found to achieve a positive pattern of adaptation despite the experience of traumatic events (Slodnjak *et al.*, 2002), it is expected that under other difficult circumstances, namely hostile treatment from nationals, Muslim immigrant ado-

lescents will also show a pattern of adaptation that is indicative of an immigrant paradox.

## METHOD

### *Subjects*

Participants were students from 12 schools in the highly urbanized western part of the Netherlands. Subjects were drawn from all four grades of junior vocational education. A total of 54 classes participated in this study. The sample consisted of 152 first-generation immigrant adolescents (71 girls), 285 second-generation immigrant adolescents (152 girls), and 406 host national adolescents (190 girls). A first-generation immigrant adolescent is born in a non-western country and has two parents born in non-western countries. A second-generation immigrant is born in the Netherlands but has at least one parent born in a non-western country and a national adolescent is born in the Netherlands with both parents born in the Netherlands. Only non-western immigrants were included in the analyses. The ages in the sample ranged from 12 to 19. The mean age of the first generation was 14.32 years ( $SD = 1.24$ ), the mean age of the second generation was 13.98 years ( $SD = 1.20$ ), and the mean age of the national adolescents was 14.14 years ( $SD = 1.05$ ). The immigrant adolescents mainly came from Turkey (27.7%), Surinam (14.6%) Morocco (18.5%) and the Netherlands Antilles (12.6%). Of the immigrant adolescents 26.5% had a different non-western origin, such as Pakistani, Filipino or Somali.

The sub-sample of Muslim adolescents consisted of 75 first-generation Muslim adolescents (36 girls) and 179 second-generation Muslim adolescents (90 girls). The mean age of the first-generation Muslim adolescents was 14.09 years ( $SD = 1.16$ ), and the mean age of the second-generation was 14.06 years ( $SD = 1.23$ ). In the Muslim subsample 46.5% came from Turkey, 30.5% came from Morocco and 33% came from a different country, for example, Afghanistan, Iraq or Pakistan.

### *Procedure*

Sixty-nine vocational schools in the Netherlands were invited to participate in a survey about multiculturalism and problem behavior. Schools were first contacted via telephone. When schools showed an interest in the research an appointment was made to explain the research in more detail. This led to 12 schools participating in the study. Prior to the research the teachers were informed about the goal of the research and letters of informed consent were sent to the students' parents. Strict anonymity was promised to the schools, the teachers and the students. The questionnaires were administered in the classroom during school hours under the supervision of a teacher and a researcher. Prior to the admission of the questionnaires the teachers received instructions about administering the questionnaire.

### *Instruments*

A survey consisting of several scales was administered to the students. The survey began with questions about demographics namely age, gender, the birthplace of both parents of the respondent, the birthplace of the respondent and the respondents' religion. Socioeconomic status was measured with the Family Affluence Scale (Currie, Elton, Todd & Platt, 1997). A sample item of this scale is "How many computers does your family own?" Since the scale has different response categories for the separate items, Cronbach's alpha could not be computed. The Family Affluence Scale has been found to be a valid indicator of adolescents' socioeconomic status (Boyce, Torsheim, Currie & Zambon, 2006). We also used the Rosenberg's (1965) self-esteem inventory. It consists of ten items which are answered on a five-point scale ranging from "completely disagree" to "completely agree". A sample item is "On the whole I am satisfied with myself". The psychological problems scale was taken from the ICSEY-study (Berry, Phinney, Sam & Vedder, 2006) and consisted

of 15 items answered on a five-point scale ranging from “never” up to “very often”. A sample item is “I feel restless”. The behavioral problems questionnaire was an adaptation of Olweus’ antisocial behavior scale. The original scale has been shown to give a valid indication of adolescents’ behavioral problems (Bendixen & Olweus, 1999; Olweus, 1989, 1994). The scale consisted of ten items. The items were scored on a five-point scale ranging from “never” up to more than 3 times during the past 12 months. A sample item of this questionnaire is: “had a serious fight with a teacher”.

The reliability of all the scales was satisfactory to good, as the Cronbach’s alphas were in range of 0.73 to 0.91.

## RESULTS

Because age and gender have been found to be closely related to self-esteem, psychological problems and behavioral problems, it was necessary to examine whether there was an equal distribution of gender and age between the first generation, the second generation, and the national adolescents to prevent any attribution errors. A chi-square test indicated that boys and girls were evenly distributed among the three groups,  $\chi^2(2, N = 844) = 0.215, p > 0.05$ . An ANOVA indicated that there were statistically significant age differences,  $F(2, 838) = 4.387, p < 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.01$ . The first-generation immigrants ( $M = 14.32, SD = 1.244$ ) were the oldest, followed by the nationals ( $M = 14.14, SD = 1.045$ ) and the second-generation immigrants were the youngest ( $M = 13.99, SD = 1.198$ ).

One element of the immigrant paradox is that immigrants perform better on measures of adaptation despite lower socioeconomic status. The mean scores and standard deviations of the variables self-esteem, psychological problems, behavioral problems and socioeconomic status are reported in Table 1. To test whether there were differences in socioeconomic status between first-generation immigrants, second-generation immigrants, and host national adolescents on socioeconomic status an ANOVA was conducted. There was a mean difference in socioeconomic status,  $F(2, 841) = 51.721, p < 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.11$ . Bonferroni adjusted *t*-tests indicated that nationals scored higher on socioeco-

nomic status than the immigrants. The means and standard deviations for socioeconomic status are included in Table 1.

To test for differences between the first generation, the second generation and the nationals on self-esteem, psychological problems, and behavioral problems a MANCOVA was conducted. As age was found to differ between the groups it was controlled for in the analysis. The MANCOVA revealed that group distinction was a statistically significant predictor of adaptation outcomes, Wilks’ lambda  $F(6, 1656) = 2.743, p < 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.01$ . Follow-up univariate ANCOVAs revealed significant effects of self-esteem,  $F(2, 830) = 5.665, p < 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.01$ , and psychological problems,  $F(2, 830) = 5.579, p < 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.01$ , but not behavioral problems,  $F(2, 830) = 0.264, p > 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.00$ . The effect sizes revealed small effects. The mean scores in Table 1 on the variables psychological problems and self-esteem show a pattern similar to an immigrant paradox. The mean score of the first-generation immigrant adolescents shows the best adaptation, while the second generation falls in-between the first generation and the nationals.

To further test the immigrant paradox, a simple contrast was calculated comparing the first generation to the nationals and comparing the second generation to the nationals. The results of this test are summarized in Table 2. In general, there is support for an immigrant paradox on the variables self-esteem and psychological problems, as the first generation has a higher self-esteem and fewer psychological problems than the nationals, but the second generation does not differ significantly from the nationals.

To test for an immigrant paradox in the Muslim subsample, it was first analyzed whether there were mean differences between first- and second-generation Muslim adolescents and national adolescents in terms of socioeconomic status. An ANOVA indicated that there was a mean difference in socioeconomic status,  $F(2, 658) = 43.129, p < 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.12$ . Bonferroni adjusted *t*-tests indicated that nationals scored higher on socioeconomic status than the first and second-generation Muslims. The means and standard deviations for socioeconomic status are included in Table 1.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations (between brackets) for the variables socioeconomic status (SES), self-esteem, psychological problems, and behavioral problems

	SES	Self-esteem	Psychological problems	Behavioral problems
First generation	2.37 (0.50)	3.96 (0.64)	2.08 (0.70)	1.91 (0.83)
Second generation	2.38 (0.47)	3.81 (0.70)	2.18 (0.75)	1.82 (0.75)
Nationals	2.73 (0.41)	3.72 (0.83)	2.28 (0.69)	1.84 (0.74)
First-generation Muslims	2.31 (0.49)	3.92 (0.63)	2.04 (0.70)	1.81 (0.80)
Second-generation Muslims	2.41 (0.45)	3.85 (0.66)	2.14 (0.80)	1.85 (0.80)

Table 2. Results of the planned comparisons, comparing the immigrant groups with the nationals

	Compared with	Psychological problems	Self-esteem	Behavioral problems
First generation	nationals	−0.21***	0.24***	0.06
Second generation	nationals	−0.11	0.09	−0.02
First-generation Muslims	nationals	−0.22*	0.20*	−0.03
Second-generation Muslims	nationals	−0.15*	0.12	0.01

Note: The mean differences reported were standardized to the mean of the nationals for ease of interpretation.

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

To test for differences between the first-generation and second-generation Muslim adolescents and the nationals on self-esteem, psychological problems and behavioral problems, a MANCOVA was conducted. Age was entered as a covariate in the analyses. The means and standard deviations of socioeconomic status, psychological problems, behavioral problems and self-esteem scales for the Muslim subsample are provided in Table 1. A MANCOVA revealed that the same pattern existed in the Muslim subsample as in the larger immigrant sample. As age was found to differ between the groups it was controlled for in the analysis. There was a marginal multivariate effect of group distinction on adaptation outcomes, Wilks' lambda  $F(6, 1294) = 1.795, p < 0.10, \eta^2 = 0.00$ . A further investigation of the univariate ANCOVAs indicated that there were significant effects of generational status on self-esteem,  $F(2, 649) = 3.114, p < 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.01$ , and on psychological problems,  $F(2, 649) = 4.395, p < 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.02$ , but not on behavioral problems,  $F(2, 649) = 0.139, p > 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.00$ . Again, effects were small. To further test the immigrant paradox, a simple contrast was calculated comparing the first generation to the nationals and comparing the second generation to the nationals. The results of this test are summarized in Table 2. In general, there is support for an immigrant paradox on the variables self-esteem and psychological problems, as the first-generation Muslim adolescents had a higher self-esteem and fewer psychological problems than the nationals. The second-generation Muslim adolescents experienced fewer psychological problems than the nationals.

## DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to investigate whether an immigrant paradox existed in a sample of non-western immigrant adolescents attending junior vocational education in the Netherlands, and in a more specific subsample of Muslim immigrant adolescents. In both the non-western and in the Muslim sample the results were similar: despite a lower socioeconomic status, first-generation immigrant adolescents had higher self-esteem, fewer psychological, and an equal amount of behavioral problems when compared to their generally more affluent national peers. The second-generation immigrant adolescents were more similar to nationals in terms of adaptation outcomes, although it should be noted that despite a lower socioeconomic status the adaptation of second-generation immigrant adolescents was not worse than that of national adolescents.

Especially the immigrant paradox that was found in the Muslim adolescent sample stands in clear contrast with Aronowitz (1984) who argues that the risk factors associated with migration are likely to lead to unfavorable adaptation outcomes in immigrant children. Muslim adolescents do not only live in poor socioeconomic contexts with poor chances for economic advancement (Herweijer, 2009), they also live in a country of which the national population treats them with contempt and hostility (Gonzalez *et al.*, 2008; Wagenaar & Van Donselaar, 2008). Given the adverse effects of discrimination (Paradies, 2006; Van Geel & Vedder, 2009) and poor socioeconomic status (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002) on adolescents' well-being, the comparatively positive adaptation of Muslim adolescents is indeed an immigrant paradox.

The results reported in this study fit a pattern already found in the United States (Harker, 2001) and Canada (Beiser *et al.*, 2002). However, even though an immigrant paradox can be concluded from the results in this study, the effect sizes are small. Why is this the case in the Netherlands? A possible explanation lies in the well-developed and easily accessible welfare system in the Netherlands (Alesina, Glaeser & Sacerdote, 2001; Gustafsson & Stafford, 1994), leading to relatively positive or good adaptation in national and adolescents with a low socioeconomic background as compared to the first-generation adolescents. The second-generation youth may converge to the levels of the nationals, or in acculturation terms, they may assimilate, but since the level of the nationals is relatively unproblematic, they converge or assimilate into a relatively unproblematic situation, hence the effects are small. In short, the welfare system may have a tempering effect on adaptation differences between these groups.

In a previous attempt to find an immigrant paradox in Europe (Sam *et al.*, 2008), diffuse support for the immigrant paradox was found. In this study the same questionnaires were used as in the study by Sam *et al.*, and, as reported in the current study, we found clear, albeit weak, confirmation for the paradox pattern. This begs the question, what explains the difference? First, the sample of the study by Sam and colleagues was made up of students enrolled in all possible levels of education available to them in their educational systems, whereas in the current study all students were sampled in the lowest educational track in the Dutch secondary education system. Characteristic of situations in which the immigrant paradox was found thus far, is the relatively low level of adaptation in the national group, the group toward which the second generation should converge. We assume that we succeeded better in the current study to achieve this situation, due to our restrictive inclusion criteria, than Sam and colleagues did. Together with the earlier argument about the welfare system in the Netherlands this explains why we found the pattern, albeit with weak effect sizes.

Furthermore, in the study by Sam and colleagues, a sample was drawn from several European countries. There are substantial differences between multicultural policies between European countries (Banting & Kymlicka, 2004), and the different ways in which immigrants are received in these countries (Berry *et al.*, 2006). These differences may also have played a role, although we are not exactly sure in what way.

## Limitations

Unfortunately we could only get self-reports as indications for the students' adaptation. Several studies suggest that rather strong and systematic differences in adaptation scores emerge depending who is the reporting person (self, parent, teacher or peer) (Stevens *et al.*, 2003). It should be noted that up to now, all studies concerning the psychosocial aspect of the immigrant paradox have solely relied on self-reports. Using appraisals of other persons may produce a different pattern. Another limitation of this study is that we had to study samples of immigrant adolescents in which several ethnic groups were combined: unfortunately, sample sizes were not large enough to study the immigrant paradox pattern in each ethnic group separately. Although immigrant paradox patterns are often studied in combined samples, it may be that differ-



ent ethnic groups may reveal different patterns. As such, future studies concerning the immigrant paradox should provide multiple reporters, and preferably focus on a single ethnic group.

### Implications

It is important to realize that the confirmation of the existence of the immigrant paradox presented in this article does not mean that immigrant adolescents are doing fine. It merely means that when compared to nationals at the same educational level, immigrant adolescents do not necessarily have a poorer pattern of adaptation. From a nationwide point of view, however, there is still work to be done as immigrant adolescents are still under-represented in the higher educational tracks and live under poorer socioeconomic circumstances than nationals (Herweijer, 2009). Furthermore, the immigrant paradox implies that increased assimilation of immigrants and consequently a more sizable convergence to the nationals' level of adaptation may result in to poorer adaptation. As stated previously, countries differ in their multicultural policies. Assimilation is found related to poorer adaptation (Berry *et al.*, 2006), so immigrant policies aimed at rapid assimilation may not produce favorable results. Although the theories and results in this chapter suggest that immigrants can achieve remarkable positive results on their own, the conditions have to be created for immigrants to experience a positive acculturation process granting them the opportunity not only to acquire and develop the skills and other competencies required for full social participation in their country of settlement, but also to maintain strong, positive bonds with their own group and ethnic culture.

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