

MARITAL STATUS, SOCIAL NETWORK, SENSE OF BELONGING TO THE COMMUNITY, AND THE FEELING OF WELL-BEING AMONG SINGLE-PARENT IMMIGRANT FAMILIES

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This study examined the social network, sense of belonging to the community, and the feeling of well-being of single-parent immigrants. In the current literature these variables are perceived as important elements in the successful adaptation of immigrant families. We found that single parents' feelings of well-being and interaction with friends differed significantly from married parents. The findings have practical application for developing social work interventions and programs.

The purpose of this study is to examine the social network, sense of belonging to the community, and the feeling of well-being of single-parent immigrants in Israel. Approximately 654,000 immigrants have come to Israel from the Commonwealth of Independent states (CIS) in the past five years. About 13 percent of them live in single-parent households, in contrast to 8 percent in the general Israeli population (Naveh, 1994).

The processes of immigration and parenthood are very stressful. They demand interaction with others and adaptation (Vega, 1991), which can be defined by two independent criteria. "First the individual must be able to successfully meet the demands of his/her environment. Second, the individual experiences a subjective sense of well-being with relation to his/her place in the environment" (Disman, 1988). Immigrant families in various stages of their adjustment to a new country face great difficulties. The accumulation of stresses over a long period, often associated with feelings of instability, dwindling of available resources, and a gradual lessening of governmentally subsidized support, has a deep impact on the parents' ability to function and consequently on the future of their children.

In general, married immigrants have fewer adjustment problems than single immigrants (Antonovsky & Katz, 1979; Bardo & Bardo, 1980; Berry & Blondel, 1982). Hence, there

is a need to examine the feeling of well-being of single-parent immigrants and the social assistance they receive.

One study has found that among recently divorced or widowed women, non-governmental support networks, such as immediate families and close friends, tended to weaken and even to fall apart fairly quickly (Lopata, 1980). The reasons for these occurrences were varied and included the women's change of workplace or residence, loss of part of a support network related to the husband, or a decrease in income or financial support that came from the husband's wages.

This article examines the relationship of immigrant single parents to the community, neighbors, and friends, as well as their sense of belonging to the community. There exists a good theoretical basis for assuming that differences in marital status will have an impact on feelings of belonging to the community and the use of informal social networks.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

Two hundred immigrants from the CIS comprised the sample for this study. Two-thirds were female, and almost 90 percent were between 20 to 50 years old. More than half were married, and 43 percent were heads of single-parent families. In terms of religious

observance, 57.5 percent of the respondents were nonobservant, and the rest considered themselves traditional. All had been living in Israel for at least one year, and one-half had emigrated at least two years prior to the study. Among the respondents, 71 percent had one or two children and the rest had three children or more.

More than 70 percent had attended an institution of higher education, and the vast majority, 92 percent, had also studied in an intensive Hebrew-language course. Only 13 percent were unemployed. Most of the single-parent families were headed by single mothers. Half of the heads of single-parents families reported that their income was not sufficient to meet their basic needs.

The immigrants were selected randomly from the Petach Tikvah Municipality files. Every fifth family in the married couples' list and every third family in the single families' list were selected. Both lists included immigrants living in Israel between one year and two years.

The data for this study were collected by trained data collectors who distributed anonymous self-administered questionnaires and gathered them when the questionnaires had been completed. Five refused to fill out the questionnaire.

Psychological Well-Being

This variable was quantified by Bradburn (1969) in a questionnaire consisting of ten items related to recent enjoyable and non-enjoyable experiences of the participants. The test yielded an indicator of a positive-negative effect and the difference between them.

The reliability factor of the internal consistency and the positive emotional scale was 0.70. The negative emotional scale had a 0.63 reliability of internal consistency.

Pearson correlators were calculated among these three scales (positive, negative, and the difference between them). A low negative correlator was found between the positive and the negative scale ($r=0.16, p<0.01$). The result is indeed significant, but the low value of the correlator strengthens the argument

that the scales are not dependent on each other.

Higher significant positive correlation was found between the positive scale and the difference ($r=0.76, p<0.01$). Significant negative correlation was found between the negative scale and the difference ($r=-.77, p<0.01$). Because of the high correlations, we decided to use the difference scale.

Level of Interaction with Friends

This variable was measured by an item on Shooval's et al. (1974) questionnaire, which elicits information on the types of friendships the immigrants maintained and the frequency with which they met these friends. The question of interest was, "In the past month, how often have you met with each of the following five groups: Russian-speaking immigrants, old friends speaking Russian, immigrant friends not speaking Russian, old friends not speaking Russian, and Israelis." The answer was given on a scale of 7, from 1—never to 7—almost every day. The reliability test for internal consistency yielded a coefficient of 0.82.

Level of Interaction with Neighbors

This variable too was measured by Shooval's et al. (1974) questionnaire. The questions relate to the frequency and content of contacts with neighbors during the past month: the number of times speaking to a neighbor; entertaining neighbors, visiting them, borrowing from them, or lending to them. The answers were checked according to a Likert scale from 1—every day to 4—once a month. Their satisfaction with neighbors was also examined by using a Likert scale: 1—very much to 4—not at all. The reliability test yielded a coefficient of 0.80.

Sense of Belonging to the Community

Items of this variable were taken from Itzhaky's (1995) questionnaire. This form measured three interrelated factors: (1) *identification*: pride in living in the community, pride in that the children are living in the

community, pride in the organization of the community; (2) *involvement*: willingness to contribute time and effort; and (3) *loyalty*: affection, an attachment to the community, and a wish to remain a part of it. Responses were on an 8-point scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." The reliability test showed a high correlation among all items, with a coefficient of 0.87.

FINDINGS

Analysis of variance showed a significant difference between the groups in regard to their well-being. The average level of well-being for the married immigrants was higher than that of the single-parent immigrants, taken as a group together. The sense of well-being went in decreasing order as follows: married group, unmarried mothers, separated individuals, divorced individuals, and finally widowers.

In addition, there was a significant difference among the groups regarding their interaction with friends ($F(4, 195)=2.6, p<0.04$). The greatest major difference was found between two groups: married and single-parent families. The average level of interaction with friends was the highest for unmarried mothers followed by those who were divorced. Next with a very small difference were the separated, the widowed, and finally the married who had the least interaction with friends. No significant differences were found between marital status and sense of belonging to the community or interaction with neighbors.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to determine whether there are differences between married parents and single-parent immigrant families in their adjustment to a new country. We examined adjustment according to four variables: well-being, interaction with friends, interaction with neighbors, and a sense of belonging to the community. We found significant differences among five groups of single and married parents in regard to their feelings of well-being and their interaction with friends. Concerning well-being, most of

the differences were between widowed and married parents; regarding the variable of interaction with friends, the significant difference was between the separated and married parents.

The findings are similar to results from previous research on veteran families in Israel. Katz and Bandor (1986) also reported differences in well-being between single and married families. They conducted multiple regression studies to determine to what extent these significant differences were derived from the family situation and not from other differences among the various groups. The researchers concluded that being a single mother had a negative effect on well-being, even when the other factors were controlled. It was found as well that the feeling of well-being among the widowed is lower than that of the other groups (married, divorced, unmarried).

Thus, we can conclude that the personal well-being of the single mother (especially among widows) is less than that of the married mother, regardless of whether she is a veteran or an immigrant.

We assumed that immigrant single-parent families are assisted by a variety of support networks—formal and informal alike. In this research we examined the relationship only to the social and communal network.

In the general population single-parent and coupled families differ in their relationship with their family members (Katz & Bandor, 1986; Mckerty & Price, 1994) and with formal networks (Marsden, 1979). Katz and Bandor (1986) found that when single mothers are more educated and are working they have a better chance of obtaining assistance from a steady network. Consequently they conclude that this network is available for those who need it the least.

We hypothesized that immigrants without families will find in friends, neighbors, and the veteran community a substitute for the family as a support network. Indeed, we found that single parents are more successful in developing friendships than the married couples. Thus we assume that married individuals, because of their mutual support, in-

vest less in forming friendships.

Although we had hypothesized that married and single families would differ concerning a sense of belonging to the community and a relationship with neighbors, our research did not support evidence of such differences. All groups reported low levels of communication with neighbors and a low sense of belonging to the community. The explanations are varied. Most of the new immigrants in our study still live in rented apartments and saw their stay there as temporary. In Israel most immigrants buy their own apartment through loans and grants they receive from the government within five years of their immigration.

A second explanation is connected with the variables themselves. As we described, relationships with friends include both Russian-speaking friends and Israeli ones. The connection with the former can be explained by a shared ethnicity and racial identity, which provide a mechanism for identification. Many recent immigrants rely heavily on their family for assistance. Others rely on their functional community, their friends and leaders from their country of origin.

Andersen and Christie (1982) discuss the reasons why new immigrant single families are seeking relations with veteran Israelis. They argue that the structure of the immigrant group's social networks can be either an asset or a liability. According to our study, an important network is available for the immigrant single parent consisting of veteran Israeli friends as well as immigrant friends. The veteran Israelis enable the immigrant single parents to gain access to much-needed resources in the government and municipality, whereas their immigrant friends provide them with a sense of common identity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In contrast to our expectations and those arising from prior research, there is a surprising consistency between the group of immigrant married families and the group of immigrant single-parent families for three of the four dependent variables. Only when

considering the dependent variable, interactions with friends, was there evidence of a significant difference between the two groups, with married parents enjoying fewer interaction with friends than the group of single-parent families. When the single-parent families were further subdivided, we found that the unmarried parents enjoyed frequent interactions with friends, whereas the separated and divorced parents had fewer interactions and the widowed parents had the least interactions. We can posit that married parents have more interfamilial contacts and are therefore less in need of interactions with friends.

Where resources are limited they should be directed to the widowed, divorced, and separated parent population, who have least contacts with friends. One of the objectives of social services is to integrate all community residents in such a way that the community will then be able to function independently while providing for the needs of all (Itzhaky, 1995). One option for encouraging immigrant single-parent families to develop contacts with friends is to arrange local meetings for groups with similar interests, thereby ensuring a healthy mix of residents. The success rate of these programs can be improved by choosing activities that are of interest to all sectors of the community. While working together to set up these meetings, friendships will naturally develop among the participants: immigrants and veteran Israelis, married and single-parent families.

When considering the dependent variable of well-being, we should be creative and employ new approaches that specifically target the immigrant widowed population. Further research will need to be carried out to determine what distinguishes this particular group from the rest of the single-parent group.

Since our results showed no difference between the two groups in a sense of belonging to the community and interaction with neighbors, we recommend that the same methods of intervention that are suitable for developing these traits in immigrant populations as a whole should be adapted for use with single-parent families.

We recommend that further studies be made of single-parent immigrant populations, examining the effect of additional variables on their adaptation, such as age of head of the household, their education, profession, and numbers and ages of their children. These variables could affect the rate at which the immigrant single-parent families adjust and the type of interventions that will facilitate this complex process.

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