Infant Temperament in Russia, United States of America, and Israel: Differences and Similarities Between Russian-speaking Families

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Abstract The present study addresses cross-cultural differences between infants born to families of Russian immigrants in USA and Israel, as well as Russian families residing in Russia, with the emphasis on evaluating the impact of immigration and acculturation. Community samples of primary caregivers of infants between 3 and 12 months of age were recruited and asked to complete temperament (IBQ-R) and acculturation (SAM) questionnaires. Results support our hypotheses that cultural influences contribute to shaping infant temperament, in so far as differences between the samples of infants were found in Perceptual Sensitivity and Low Intensity Pleasure domains of temperament. Although, a number of temperament scales did not significantly correlate with the degree of parents’ acculturation, different patterns of correlations emerged for Russian–Israeli and for Russian–American samples.

Keywords Infancy · Temperament · Cross-cultural · Longitudinal · Russian immigration

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Introduction

The present study focused on the link between the contextual factors and temperament of infants of Russian decent. In addition, the impact of the immigration process on infant temperament was examined. While limited work has been done to explore environmental elements, such as culture, it is important to consider how non-biological factors may play an integral role in social-emotional development and early manifestation of temperament in particular. This potential environmental influence is especially valuable to consider during infancy, given that the developmental processes are particularly sensitive to environmental factors such as parenting styles and cultural traditions [1]. The investigation of cross-cultural differences in infancy are likely to produce a more profound understanding of how different cultural contexts impact developmental processes, and whether our understanding of temperament development in one cultural context can be readily generalized to another culture, without any limitations.

Potential social influences on the development of temperament likely include cultural differences, and the impact of major life events, such as immigration, both of which may play important roles in shaping the development of temperament and personality. Most researchers agree that temperament represents a group of interrelated factors, such as activity level, emotionality, and stimulus sensitivity [2, 3]. The psychobiological approach proposed by Rothbart and Derryberry [4] has conceptualized temperament as constitutionally based individual differences in reactivity and self-regulation, influenced by heredity, maturation, and experience, wherein “constitutional” refers to the relatively enduring biological make-up of the individual, influenced by the interactions of heredity, maturation, and experience. Reactivity encompasses arousability of affect, motor activity, and attentional responses (i.e., orienting), whereas, self-regulation refers to processes such as behavioral inhibition and self-soothing, serving to modulate reactivity [5]. Thus, the development of temperament has then been conceptualized as a product of genetic influences, the development of the central nervous systems (CNS), as well as the child’s experience in the surrounding environment. Parenting, and related contextual factors, such as culture and acculturation, would be expected to play a particularly influential role in shaping such experience in early childhood, likely contributing to evolving individual differences in temperament, manifesting themselves in the first year of life.

The process of child development cannot be separated from the child’s immediate social and cultural environment, which likely produces different developmental experiences for children in different cultures [6]. For example, children in different cultures may go through the same developmental stages, but at different times, with varying intensities, and/or with differing outcomes. Despite such important potential differences, most of the current developmental theories were generated and tested in the context of western cultures, mostly in the USA [6]. Cross-cultural research on child development provides a broader insight into different aspects of the phenomena, potentially bringing to light mechanisms and processes that may go undetected when studied with a culturally homogenous group. Bornstein [7] specifically emphasized the advantages of multicultural investigations in developmental research, because these studies enrich our understanding of the investigated phenomenon, allowing wider and more reliable generalizations.

The theoretical framework for anticipating culture-related effects has been proposed by Super and Harkness [8]. They conceptualized this interface between child and culture as a “developmental niche”, that was described as a function of (1) customs [especially those related to child rearing], (2) settings available to the child, and (3) caregiver psychosocial characteristics. Each of the three facets then shapes the developmental