Introduction

Children’s growth implies continuous change and developmental transitions. Transitions therefore have to be supported by stability in order to ensure psychological achievement and integrity. Researchers have argued the reasons and factors compromising such stability. Parental discord, maternal psychological dysfunction, neighbourhood disadvantage, unsupportive parenting are all considered to be extremely compromising in child development and might be promoted by unique negative context-specific experiences. A good example in this regard is provided by the transition to a foreign culture.

Parents decide to move from their home country for economic, socio-political or educational betterment reasons, exposing themselves and their children to extraordinary stress, hardship and deprivations. Regardless of the reason for migrating, the process of adjustment to a foreign country for the child is frequently associated with stressful separation from extended family members, anxiety, depression, low-self esteem, decreased parental support and living with distressed adults.

While recent developmental research has emphasized the influence of contextual factors in child adjustment, there has been little consideration of the specific experiences of children living in cross-cultural transition. Empirical research in other disciplines, such as sociology, cross-cultural and educational psychology, has developed useful leads on minority and immigrant children, suggesting different pathways to their successful adjustment. Since Italy is one of the major European countries receiving immigrant families, it is essential to delineate positive factors, which facilitate these families and their children to succeed in the process of adaptation.

The present thesis contributes to this direction since it has been conceptualised as an attempt to understand the specific psychological experiences of immigrant children and their parents in North East Italy. It is important to clarify that, when referring to “immigrant children”, we strictly apply this definition to foreign-born children who have migrated, not to Italy-born second generation children. We also apply the term “ethnic minority”, meaning children born in Italy who belong to the native Slovene community, which represents a special status minority in the area considered. While the experiences of foreign-born and ethnic minority children may differ, they share a common cultural situation of family background.
The present research provides data from a complex investigation into multiethnic immigrant and minority samples in relation to the developmental context of the child, parents and the relational processes within the family. First, the study aims to evaluate whether experiencing cross-cultural transition is associated with serious psychological and behavioural problems. Secondly, it correlates between such problems and children’s different ethnic origins were considered. Third, because the immigration experience involves complex changes within a family system, the specific contribution of parental well-being and parent-child interaction to children’s psychological and socio-cultural adjustment to their new country of settlement was examined.

In order to achieve the latter goals, several methodological concerns have been implemented. Firstly, the study’s design included measures which covered psychological, socio-cultural, cognitive and linguistic domains. The reason for applying such data collection measures is to provide a more complex evaluation of the child competencies and to explore more deeply developmental variables which account for problematic outcomes in both school and family contexts. Moreover, we considered it important to include standardized questionnaires and scales, as well as to integrate our data with different assessment approaches.

Secondly, we used several informants who provided self-reports, teacher assessment and parent evaluation. The aim was to obtain multi-methodical combinations of self and adults’ reports, which represent different and valid sources of information in relation to the areas investigated. Finally, a cross-cultural data collection was adopted, focusing on the most representative ethnic groups that characterize the local immigrant and minority communities.

The present thesis is constituted by seven chapters. The first and the last chapters consist of introduction and concluding remarks, respectively. The content of the third chapter has been presented at national and international conferences and prepared for publication as scientific articles. Moreover, the structural organization of the chapters that contain experimental parts (chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6) is not mutually complementary, but rather independent, which means that they can be read separately.

The first chapter provides an overview of main theoretical guidelines and current research findings on the psychological and socio-cultural adjustment outcomes in immigrant populations. It covers developmental issues regarding child competencies as well as the influence of parent and family processes. Consequently, a conceptual framework of the link between child development and specific family contributions is
presented, because it appears to be important in explaining the adaptation of immigrant communities as a whole.

The second chapter explores the different pathways of recent immigration into Italy, reporting descriptive data on social and demographic characteristics of major ethnic groups throughout the territory. A description of important local migrant populations is provided, given that the study is performed in the Friuli-Venezia Giulia Region which borders the Balkan area. Definitions are given of the social and political characteristics of different ethnic communities, because such issues are extremely important in shaping the adaptation of these communities. Finally, special attention is focused on the children of immigrants residing in the area in relation to school and neighbourhood environment.

The third chapter reports preliminary findings on the link between immigration experience and different psychological outcomes. The study applied different measures of self-reported problems to assess children’s psychological and socio-cultural factors in relation to positive or negative adjustment. Additionally, we investigated whether belonging to a specific immigrant ethnic group was related to different types of adjustment.

The forth chapter is specifically dedicated to psychological and socio-cultural correlates of cognitive achievement, focusing on a within-group comparison of immigrant (Albanian, Russian and Serb) and native Italian and Slovene children.

The fifth chapter presents results obtained from teachers’ points of view on child experienced problems, using two different report forms on psychological and socio-cultural domains and pointing on the specific ethnic and immigrant diversity in backgrounds in the sample investigated.

Chapter six presents the results on the linkages between parental psychological well-being and child adjustment, exploring parent-child interaction in terms of a mutually responsive relationship. Furthermore, the potential influence of immigration experiences on specific groups was addressed.

The last chapter, chapter seven, comprises a final discussion and concluding remarks, suggesting directions for future research and evidence-based practice in relation to immigrant populations. The findings of the thesis are discussed in light of some limits and weaknesses, as well as in terms of valuable empirical contribution to our knowledge of immigrant children.