The primary goal of the present research was to explore patterns of psychological and socio-cultural adjustment among immigrant and non-immigrant children. In achieving such goal, we attempted to fill the existing gaps in the research literature on immigrant children and especially in the Italian context. We considered the adjustment processes that groups of children from different cultural settings experience in the host Italian culture. Differences and similarities among immigrant and non-immigrant children’s psychological and socio-cultural outcomes were investigated regarding their expression within school and family contexts.

In general, our results confirm that children who have been exposed to migration are most at risk of serious adjustment problems because of their more pronounced emotional instability, aggression, depressive symptoms and disadvantaged cognitive performance. Moreover, such maladjusted outcomes appear to be reflected in school and family settings, which involve immigrant children’s difficult psychological and socio-cultural relations with their teachers and parents.

In this chapter, a summary of the main findings is discussed regarding possible implications for interventions with immigrant populations, as well as some limitations and indications for future investigations.

7.1 Summary

The present research employed three samples of 7 to 13 years old immigrant (Albanian, Russian and Serb) and non-immigrant (Italian and Slovene) children in the Friuli-Venezia Giulia region. We administered teachers’ and self-reports to study children’s psychological and socio-cultural adaptation, and parents’ reports to assess parental psychological functioning and its relation to child adjustment outcomes.
The prevalence of adjustment problems among our immigrant participants expressed by higher emotional instability, aggression, depressive symptoms, and lower prosocial behavior (Chapter 3) underscores the need to plan adequate intervention for these children by improving their integration in school and community settings.

The association between children’s psychological and socio-cultural adjustment and cognitive performance difficulties (Chapter 4) sustains results provided by other studies (Leavey et al., 2004; Kolaitis et al., 2003), namely that such difficulties are more prevalent in immigrant samples. Furthermore, such linkage undermines the importance of establishing preventive acts, adjusting school curricula to the needs of immigrant children.

When teachers were asked to evaluate children’s adjustment (Chapter 5), they all confirmed children’s self-reports on the migration-related negative influence. Immigrant children were rated by teachers higher on emotional instability, aggression, internalising, anxious and depressive symptoms.

In Chapter 6 we also investigated parent’s psychological functioning due to immigration experience and its relation to child adjustment. In line with previous findings (Garcia Coll & Szalacha, 2004; Roer-Strier et al., 2005; Smith et al., 2004), both immigrant mothers and fathers showed lower self-esteem, higher depressive symptoms, parental distress and parent-child dysfunctional interaction. Moreover, parental psychological functioning was strongly related to children’s adjustment particularly in the immigrant group.

7.2 Implications for Intervention

Although some research findings frame immigration as an opportunity for cultural change, which does not involve negative consequences (Stansfeld et al., 2004; Sowa et al., 2000; Giavrimis et al., 2003), most deem the migration experience to be extremely stressful for children (Leavey et al., 2004; Atzaba-Poria et al., 2004). Accordingly, our findings confirm the existing linkage between stress of migration and problems in adjustment, reporting that, relative to non-immigrants, immigrant children experience a variety of psychological and socio-cultural problems, including depression, emotional instability, depression and cognitive-related difficulties. Moreover, such adjustment problems among children of immigrants relate to family issues and,
subsequently have a negative impact on parenting and psychological well-being of parents.

As long as migration experience may represent a quite stable and stressful phenomenon, intervention support is needed in order to avoid its negative consequences on children. Based on such evidence, preventive programs should be designed to meet the needs of immigrant children. In order to be effective, such programs should be implemented in the earliest stages of the expression of maladjustment, and should be maintained in long term periods of time as immigrant children represent a population most at risk. With this purpose in mind, implications for preventive support deriving from the current findings are proposed next.

A primary prevention should involve specific political practices at national level as well as local policies adopted by schools and community services. In doing so, it is worthwhile to identify vulnerable groups of children showing a predisposition or clear evidence of maladaptive and problematic behaviors.

There has been very little consideration towards understanding the process of immigration in Italy as it affects children, and the existing conceptual paradigms have yet to be applied and implemented into governmental practices. A central point in this regard is that policy and institutional environments are as important determinants of the success of migration, as working together more efficiently at regional and local levels can be critical for the positive outcomes of migration. For example, it has been suggested that community-based organisations play a central role during the social, cultural, political and economic adaptation of immigrants (Cordero-Guzman, 2005). For this reason, the reinforcement of such organisations at national and regional levels could assist families and their children by providing social services and community programmes designed to facilitate the psychological adaptation and socio-economic incorporation of immigrants into the Italian society.

In implementing such activities, it is also important to consider immigrant groups and organisations that fulfil vital social functions between their communities and the host society. Immigrant organisations may also play a central role in all stages of the adaptation process thorough orientation of immigrant families, their reconstruction of social ties, and subsequent successful adaptation.

Beside the establishment of community-based and policy interventions, it is essential to recognise that immigrant children require special attention and support. It has been suggested that school is the most appropriate institution that may offer
adequate support to immigrant families and their children (Aronowitz, 1984). Moreover, immigrants are more prone to accept school provided services than those from other governmental or private bodies. Schools can effectively assist immigrant families through everyday direct contact, also considering that early manifestation of child problems is more likely to be detected in school, thus allowing effective prevention.

The results of our studies suggest that immigrant as compared to non-immigrant children manifest more psychological and socio-cultural maladjustment (Chapters 3 and 4) and that such maladjustment is strongly associated with cognitive difficulties in school settings and parental psychological well-being (Chapters 5 and 6). A possible approach to reduce the problems experienced by those children may consist in school-based group activities for immigrant families, through socio-cultural orientation and services. In such occasions, schools may operate as an important cultural resource, providing support to immigrant families via school personnel and local community services.

There is indeed a critical need for research on immigrant children before planning school support activities and when considering the positive impact these programs might have on child developmental outcomes (Garcia Coll et al., 1996). Similar programs have been previously applied to high-risk immigrant children and adolescents (Feuerstein et al., 1976), suggesting the compensatory benefits of group care circumstances for this population, regarding psychological, socio-cultural and cognitive functioning.

Additionally, school-based programs can focus on empowerment of parents. The implementation of immigrant parent support groups may also give them the opportunity to share their parenting experiences in a host society and help them to adequately accompany their children’s development. Furthermore, parents should be encouraged to monitor their child’s activities and everyday social interactions, to support their child, and to make known the negative consequences of stress-related migration experience for both parents and children.
7.3 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The studies presented in this thesis build upon the existing literature by providing data for understanding children's psychological and socio-cultural adjustment following immigration into Italy. In doing so, they move the field beyond immigrant versus non-immigrant comparisons to consider differences in the experience of migration at the level of the individual child, school and family settings. Furthermore, this thesis demonstrates that some methodological constructs and relationships, such as those outlined in immigrant child’s normative development in context and parent-child interaction models (Garcia Coll & Szalacha, 2004; Brody et al., 2002), may have cross-cultural use.

The psychological adjustment of ethnic minority children involves variability, continuity, and changing outcomes, and immigrant status provides an important lens for viewing these interrelated social and cultural processes. Although results from the current studies improve our knowledge on immigration consequences in children, some methodological considerations must be noted in interpreting the findings. Hence, an important advantage of such considerations derives from the fact that they can facilitate further investigations.

First of all, we investigated psychological and socio-cultural domains of child adjustment through standardized questionnaires and tests. The measures applied to our studies have established validity and reliability in cross-cultural research, but remain un-tested in our multiethnic sample’s countries of origin. One problem in assessing psychological outcomes in children in multicultural settings is the use of culturally sensitive and valid measures in different linguistic and ethnic contexts. In fact, a frequent criticism in this domain is the application of standardized instruments on a specific ethnic sample - instruments with high validity in the culture in which they were originally developed, but which have not been tested in the sample’s country of origin.

This limitation also requires consideration on the universality of psychological difficulties in cross-cultural study designs (Cheng et al., 2001). One alternative is given by the ethnocentric approach, which emphasizes that instruments used across different cultures may be theoretically and psychometrically equivalent (Sartorius & Kuyken, 1994), and another - by the pragmatic approach, assuming the importance of non-significant alteration of measures’ psychometric properties (Edwards, 1994). Future
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studies may attempt to address these issues by developing measures, specifically designed for immigrant multicultural samples.

Secondly, we used only self and teachers’ reports in investigating children’s psychological and socio-cultural outcomes. The use of self-reports would have reflected children’s subjective perceptions on their experiences within the host culture, whereas teacher reports could have detected children’s behaviours at school as viewed by teachers. Future replications of the present study should also include peer and parent reports on child adjustment in order to obtain a multidimensional assessment of the topics investigated (Stevens et al., 2005).

Finally, caution is needed in extending our findings to other immigrant groups. Although most of the children in the studies presented here indicated the experience of a range of immigration stressors through higher maladjustment levels, possibly the stress of immigration varies depending on pre-migration and post-migration circumstances. Future research in this area should investigate the multiple interacting factors that may influence children’s adjustment.

In conclusion, it is important to bear in mind some practical implications of our research for children, teachers and parents who took part in it. At the moment, we have not implemented any intervention program at schools with immigrant communities. In the future, we hope to use our research to draw attention on the issue of immigrant children. Research-based intervention practice could undoubtedly help to address the needs of children of immigrants, as well as to mobilize support actions both inside and outside the immigrant communities.