

Thanks but No Thanks? Gratitude and Indebtedness Within Intergenerational Relations After  
Immigration

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Abstract

**Objective:** To explore how 1.5-generation immigrant adolescents' feelings of gratitude and indebtedness toward their parents are manifested and shape their intergenerational relations after migration.

**Background:** The emotions of gratitude and indebtedness result from experiences of receiving and are central to the process of reciprocity. Although closely connected, gratitude and indebtedness are distinct and may have different consequences for intergenerational relations. The contextual nature of gratitude and indebtedness becomes particularly evident in immigration context.

**Method:** Semistructured interviews were conducted with 80 adolescents who were 1.5-generation immigrants. Data analysis was guided by the grounded theory approach.

**Results:** Results comprise an evolving theory of adolescents' gratitude and indebtedness in intergenerational relations after family migration. In immigrant families, intergenerational relations are strained by a sense of indebtedness and bolstered by a sense of gratitude. That said, gratitude and indebtedness are also associated with ambivalence and intersect to affect intergenerational relations concurrently.

**Conclusion:** Emotions of gratitude and indebtedness toward parents are often experienced by immigrant adolescents after migration regardless of their cultural or ethnic background. These emotions shape intergenerational communication in immigrant families.

**Implications:** Social workers, teachers, integration services, and anyone working with immigrant families with teenagers may benefit from better understanding how adolescents experience gratitude and indebtedness within intergenerational relations and how these emotions are associated with parent–child relationship characteristics after migration.

*Key Words:* gratitude, immigrant adolescents, immigrant families, indebtedness, intergenerational relations.

Immigrant adolescents often have complex feelings of compliance, loyalty, solidarity, obligation, and gratitude toward their parents (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Although gratitude and its close associates, such as obligation and solidarity, are often assumed to characterize and shape intergenerational relations in immigrant families (e.g., Foner & Dreby, 2011; Fuligni, 2001; Kwak, 2003; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001), empirical research on gratitude in the context of immigration is sparse. Even less focus has been devoted to indebtedness, a distinct emotional state of obligation to pay back another person (Watkins, Scheer, Ovnicek, & Kolts, 2006; McCullough, Kimeldorf, & Cohen, 2008).

In the present study, we explore how gratitude and indebtedness are manifested in intergenerational relations after immigration. More specifically, we aim to grasp the experiences of 1.5-generation adolescents who have migrated to Finland before or during their early teens (7–14 years of age). The 1.5-generation adolescents form an immigrant group whose adolescence and development are considerably influenced by at least two cultures and processes: (a) ethnic socialization in the culture and country of origin and (b) acculturation in the culture of the receiving country (Bartley & Spooner, 2008; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

#### GRATITUDE AND INDEBTEDNESS IN INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONS

Gratitude, with its positive effects on social relationships, has received increasing attention among social and behavioral scientists from various fields (Algoe 2012; Li, Zhang, Li, Li, & Ye, 2012). From the cognitive–emotional perspective, gratitude has been defined as a positive emotion that follows from “the perception that one has benefited from the costly, intentional, voluntary action of another person” (McCullough et al., 2008, p. 281). It entails a strong social component. First, gratitude is a prosocial emotion that often leads to benefactors’ prosocial behavior in the future (McCullough et al., 2008). Second, gratitude can be viewed as a moral

imperative that typically results from and stimulates subsequent moral behavior (McCullough et al., 2001; Watkins et al., 2006). These social components of gratitude distinguish it from other closely related positive emotions, such as happiness (McCullough et al., 2008). In addition, gratitude can be viewed not only as repayment to a benefactor but also as a grateful person's positive responsiveness to receiving (Algoe 2012; Algoe, Kurtz, & Hilaire, 2016), thereby playing a role in forming and maintaining close relationships.

Gratitude is related to indebtedness, which is often defined via obligation. According to Greenberg (1980), the psychological construct of indebtedness is "a state of obligation to repay another" (p. 4). In recent studies, indebtedness has been understood as being a distinct emotional state from gratitude (McCullough et al., 2008; Watkins et al., 2006). The rationale for the distinction is that gratitude is a pleasant emotional state related to acts of kindness, such as a desire to help and to be close to the benefactor, whereas indebtedness is a stressful and uncomfortable emotional state that drives avoidance behaviors to avoid psychological discomfort during interactions with the benefactor (Greenberg, 1980; Watkins et al., 2006). Hence, receiving and reciprocity illustrate both gratitude and indebtedness, but the underlying cognitions associated with each drive one's emotional state and its associated behaviors. For instance, when the expectations of return from the benefactor increase, indebtedness of the beneficiary increases but gratitude decreases (Watkins et al., 2006).

A large body of cross-sectional and longitudinal evidence suggests that gratitude is positively related to relationship formation and maintenance as well as satisfaction with a relationship and subjective well-being (for a review, see Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010). Studies on indebtedness within intergenerational relationships are scarce, but an exception is Kang (2010), in which Korean American adolescents' sense of indebtedness toward their

migrant parents framed intergenerational relations positively and served as a buffer against conflict (see also Kang & Larson, 2014).

Psychological studies on gratitude and indebtedness between a benefactor and beneficiary often use hypothetical vignettes (e.g., Naito, Wangwan, & Tani, 2005; Watkins et al., 2006). In contrast, in the present study, we explore how gratitude and indebtedness within intergenerational relations are present, intertwined, and dealt with in real-life family contexts from the perspective of 1.5-generation immigrant adolescents.

#### GRATITUDE AND INDEBTEDNESS ACROSS CULTURAL AND IMMIGRATION CONTEXTS

Gratitude is an important social value worldwide. Gratefulness is a virtue that is essential in the theologies of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000) as well as among polytheistic and nontheistic religions in Asia (Naito et al., 2005). However, research on the role of gratitude within intergenerational relations has been conducted predominantly in Asian contexts (e.g., Naito et al., 2005). This is probably due to the unique cultural interest in this topic stemming from Confucianism; filial piety and showing gratitude toward one's parents are particularly important social principles in many Asian countries (Kang & Raffaelli, 2016). Also, more intergenerational loyalty is expected in collectivistic cultures, such as those commonly found in Asia (Kwak, 2003).

In the context of immigration, cultural expectations concerning intergenerational relations are more complex. Many researchers have noted that parents' sacrifices form an important narrative shaping intergenerational relations after migration. In Qin's (2008) study, Chinese parents living in United States emphasized that they endured social, cultural, and economic hardships as immigrants for only one reason: To provide their children an opportunity for a better education than they believed would be possible in China. Parental loss of status in a

new society certainly affects parents but may also negatively affect children whose parents have diminished morale (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001, p. 76).

Perceptions of parents' sacrifices may also serve as a protective factor for parent–child relationships (Kang, 2010). According to Kang (2010), among Korean American youth, perceptions of parental sacrifice led to an internalized sense of indebtedness toward one's parents. Thus, family's past challenges may evoke a sense of indebtedness through which adolescents frame their parent–child relations. The felt indebtedness may then shape adolescents' behavior toward their parents by promoting filial responsibility and a desire for success and positive interactions (Kang & Raffaelli, 2016). Thus, the obligation felt toward parents among emerging immigrant adults is not only an unconditional cultural mandate but a debt owed to their parents for sacrifices endured on behalf of the child. In other words, felt obligation in this context is inextricably part of the family's immigration experiences (Kang & Larson, 2014).

Although immigrant families are commonplace throughout the world, little is known about how gratitude and indebtedness in intergenerational relations are experienced by the adolescents after migration. In the present study, we seek to understand how gratitude and indebtedness are accounted for by the 1.5-generation immigrant adolescents who have migrated to Finland with their families. Thus far, gratitude and indebtedness have been considered important and self-evident elements of intergenerational relations after migration (Foner & Dreby, 2011; Kwak, 2003; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). However, empirical evidence concerning the nature and manifestation of those psychological states in immigrant families is lacking. Specifically, to our best knowledge, there are no previous studies on gratitude and indebtedness per se, and particularly the experience of those psychological states toward

parents in parent–child relations among 1.5-generation adolescents. The present study was designed to address this gap.

## METHOD

### *Data Collection and Participants*

We use data from 80 semistructured interviews of 1.5-generation immigrant adolescents. The data were collected in 2012 in the Helsinki metropolitan area (Finland) for a larger study on intergenerational relations in immigrant families. The semistructured interview protocol (see Appendix) focused on adolescents' experiences and perceptions of migration and its effects on intergenerational relations in different fields of life (family, friends, school, free time).

The interviewer (the first author) did not ask directly about gratitude or indebtedness toward parents, but the theme was discussed when adolescents spontaneously brought it up and within the interview questions concerning the theme (questions concerning duties, responsibilities, cultural expectations, etc.). Initial analyses of the interview data concerned the role of intergenerational relations in different social contexts of adolescents' daily lives (home, school, peers). During the analysis process, researchers noticed that the themes of gratitude and indebtedness were constantly brought up by the interviewees and often framed adolescents' accounts on their relationship with their parents. The present study builds on these observations from the original study.

The interviewees were recruited mainly from schools via student advisors. To reach the target group of the study (i.e., the 1.5-generation immigrants), student advisors were asked to introduce the possibility of participation in the study to all of their pupils who had been in Finland less than 8 years. The researchers were provided with the telephone numbers of adolescents who belonged to this group and were potentially willing to participate. They were

then called so more information about the study could be provided and to schedule an interview. This resulted in 68 interviews, and 12 additional interviews were conducted with participants subsequently reached via snowball sampling. In addition to their personal consent, following the ethical guidelines of the cities' (Helsinki, Vantaa, Espoo) educational departments, children under 15 years of age needed their parents' permission to participate in the study.

All the participants were born outside of Finland and had lived in Finland for less than 8 ( $M = 4.5$ ) years. The sample included 45 boys (55%) and 35 girls (45%), all between 13 and 18 ( $M = 15$ ) years of age. Most participants had arrived in Finland when between 7 and 12 years of age; 19 of them migrated at 13 or 14 years of age. They were students in 26 schools, had originated from 20 countries, and spoke 20 languages as their mother tongue. About one third of the participants ( $n = 29$ ) were from Africa; another one third ( $n = 24$ ) were from Europe, the United States, or former Soviet countries; 18 were from the Middle East region; and 9 were from South Asian countries. About two thirds of the participants had migrated to Finland from the countries that were unstable and unsecure (e.g., Iraq, Somalia), and many of them had refugee status in Finland.

#### *Interview Procedures*

The interviews, which were audio-recorded and transcribed, were primarily conducted at schools with a few exceptions and lasted from 20 to 90 minutes ( $M = 37$  minutes). Three interviews were conducted in English; all others were conducted in Finnish, which was a mother tongue of the interviewer and a second or a third language for the interviewees. The Finnish language skills varied among participants from intermediate to fluent; a majority could express themselves in Finnish with ease and stated that they felt their Finnish speaking skills were quite good. The interviewees received two movie tickets for participation.



*Data Analysis*

Data analysis was supported by the use of Atlas.ti and IBM SPSS and guided by Strauss and Corbin's (1990) methods and procedures for grounded theory (see also LaRossa, 2005). Specifically, our analysis of the data involved open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; LaRossa, 2005). In the first phase of the analysis, our aim with open coding was to understand how 1.5-generation adolescents experience and make sense of intergenerational relations in their families after migration to Finland. We gave conceptual labels to all participant accounts concerning intergenerational relations. After rereading and scrutinizing the data and making comparisons with existing theories and research, we decided to direct our analysis to gratitude and indebtedness in intergenerational relations following migration because we perceived these two emotions were capturing many of the essential meanings in the categories.

In the axial coding phase, all the accounts related to gratitude or indebtedness within intergenerational relations (e.g., talk of reciprocity within intergenerational relations and parents' cultural expectations on adolescents' proper behavior) were analyzed in terms of their relatedness to each other, conditions, and consequences (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The key concepts around each subcategory, and categories that linked subcategories were sorted out.

The final coding procedure was selective coding in which the relationship between categories was further developed and a model of evolving theory was formulated. The first author was responsible for the coding process but the contents of the categories were discussed within our research group during the analysis process.

Reaching theoretical saturation in relation to this particular topic was not possible via sampling given the secondary data used for these analyses. However, with data from 80 semistructured interviews, each category was saturated during the analysis phase. Validation

techniques used to enhance the credibility of our findings included collaborative interpretation of the data and using the constant comparative methods.

## RESULTS

Forty-five participants (20 girls and 25 boys) touched on gratitude or indebtedness in relation to the intergenerational relations in their families. All but one South Asian participant discussed gratitude or indebtedness within intergenerational relations, and about half of participants in each of the other ethnocultural groups (Africa, Middle East, Western [European and American], former Soviet) did so as well. Hence, gratitude and indebtedness seemed to be an essential part of intergenerational relations after migration among these adolescents, and particularly among the South Asian adolescents.

Adolescents' talk about gratitude and indebtedness was often tied to the parents' immigration decision in one way or another. Adolescents' pondered the reasons behind the immigration and its consequences for family members. Their perspective was most often in the future as they frequently framed gratitude and indebtedness as something that would be realized when they became adults, whether related to care, economic responsibilities, or their own success in later life.

In the analysis, drawing a line between adolescents' accounts of gratitude and indebtedness was sometimes difficult. This means that adolescents talked about gratitude and indebtedness within the same interview and around the same subject. It is important to note, however, that some adolescents spoke predominantly about gratitude (i.e., expressed *positive emotions* when talking about intergenerational responsibilities and expectations), and some emphasized indebtedness more (i.e., expressed *negative emotions* and the negative aspects of reciprocity and owing parents). We identified six subcategories; three as types of gratitude and

three as types of indebtedness (see Table 1 for examples and definitions of each). On the basis of the six subcategories presented in Table 1, we further developed three categories that illustrate immigrant adolescents' reflections of gratitude and indebtedness toward their parents: *migration decision*, *intergenerational contract*, and *affection*. The contents of all three categories include both positively and negatively expressed emotional statements, representing both gratitude and indebtedness.

This study provides an evolving theory capturing the emotions of gratitude and indebtedness in intergenerational relations experienced by many immigrant adolescents in Finland (see Figure 1). Gratitude and indebtedness were manifested in three categories that contain the expression of both gratitude and indebtedness. As seen in Figure 1, gratitude and indebtedness are complex, ambiguous, and interrelated emotions. They are experienced and accounted for differently depending on which aspect of intergenerational relations is evaluated: migration decision, intergenerational contract, or affection. These emotions are also distinct to the extent that they may have opposite ramifications in terms of either supporting or impeding intergenerational relations. The categories of gratitude and indebtedness in intergenerational relations from the perspective of immigrant adolescents are described in detail next.

#### *Migration Decision*

*Migration decision* was the ruling category of gratitude and indebtedness. Adolescents expressed gratefulness toward their parents, who had made sacrifices in their own life for the sake of their children's future. Achieving a good education in Finland was perceived to open new horizons, particularly among those from developing countries or countries where war and difficult societal circumstances limited adolescents' possibilities to get proper education. Even those from countries with better circumstances—other Western countries or China, for instance—

emphasized the value of a free and high-quality school system, including free university studies for Finnish citizens, as an important motive behind the migration decision of their parents. The adolescents also recognized that going to school and being able to socialize with friends (from school) in Finland provided opportunities for themselves but punctuated the personal sacrifices their parents had made related to migration decision: “[My parents] have had difficulties with the language and their life. They don’t have that many friends [in Finland], and their job is far from what it used to be in Iran, so they are a bit bored” (Iranian boy, 13 years of age).

Framing the gratitude for their parents’ sacrifices was admiration of parents’ persistence. The adolescents often described their family history with pride: “Mom hopes I can accomplish the things I dream about, [but] she has gone through a lot of problems in her former life, so I have always hoped I could just help and support her” (Somali girl, 16 years of age).

In contrast to the aforementioned findings, some adolescents viewed their parents’ migration decision in pursuit of a better future for their children less positively. Although not explicitly discussed in their families, these adolescents sensed an expectation for gratitude and felt pressure to succeed from their parents, given the sacrifices they had made. They expressed resentment for experiencing a persistent feeling of indebtedness to their parents for deciding to migrate regardless of what the adolescents themselves wanted. Although they indicated that the migration decision was often discussed with their parents, they did not feel that the parents took the adolescents’ own wishes into account when making the decision to migrating and consequently they viewed their parents’ sacrifices in more negative terms:

The biggest reason for migration was me. Why [else] would my father give up his good job and leave? The reason was me, and nothing else. [My parents] work hard on behalf of me and get themselves nothing, but when I grow up, if I

get a good job and a good salary, I am not going to give from it to them. . . . I will have my own family. . . . When it will be just the two of them [when I'm an adult], what then? (Iranian boy, 16 years of age)

This boy's account illustrates how obligation and anxiety were intertwined in his thoughts about his future duties as a son. This sense of indebtedness evoked negative emotions, such as sorrow, anger, and embarrassment among some adolescents. They expressed uneasy feelings related to the decline of their parents' socioeconomic status in Finland relative to what it had been in their country of origin. Perceiving the worries and difficulties parents experience after migration was stressful for many of the participants.

There was a strong sense of ambivalence among these adolescents between admiring their parents' resilience and feeling burdened by the parents' expectations after migration. Parents' migration decision was considered a desirable decision, offering better future prospects particularly for the children, but these prospects were often met with contradictory feelings. Gratefulness toward parents strengthened adolescents' aspirations and their relationships with their parents, whereas indebtedness was accompanied by anxiety, powerlessness, and frustration.

#### *Intergenerational Contract*

Talk of gratitude and indebtedness also occurred in the context of an *intergenerational contract*. The focus of statements in this category centered on parents' purported perceptions of the proper rights and responsibilities within parent-child relations. The adolescents we interviewed often stated, in both positively and negatively oriented statements, that their parents emphasized reciprocity. In short, for better or worse, the idea was that parents took care of and supported their children, and in return adult children should try to fulfill their parents' expectations and take

care of their parents. This 14-year-old provides a concrete example of why he always tries to help his parents and respect their wishes:

Respecting the family is something I value. If you just think about it. How you have made your mother tired when you were a baby. When she was just about to fall asleep and you started to cry. And she will have to wake up again, to give you some milk. (Iraqi boy, 14 years of age)

The nature of gratitude and indebtedness in parent–child relations varied according to context, developmental stage, gender, and cultural background. For instance, boys with African or Asian backgrounds often construed their future financial responsibilities to parents as part of fulfilling their filial piety. These concrete expectations of their family also relate closely to the category of *migration decision* and parents' possibly oversized expectations concerning adolescents' educational and professional possibilities, at least in the short term, in a new country.

Expressions of gratitude and indebtedness within intergenerational relations are tied to societal system, especially when it comes to aspects of financial support and care. In Finland, the welfare state continues to be strong, despite current societal challenges, such as population aging, changing job markets, and increasingly polarized political debates (Pyrhönen, Leinonen, & Martikainen, 2017). In principle, this should mean that adolescents should prepare to support their parents more socially than financially.

Financial support of one's parents and other kin in the country of origin was an important topic to many of our interviewees. Most pertinently, some adolescents believed that they had a responsibility to take care of their parents (whereas others did not), and many among them indicated that their parents wanted to return to the country of origin as soon as their children

became financially independent in the new society. The family's long-term plan was clear to this 13-year-old Thai boy, who seemed worried:

When I know the language well and am a bit older, my parents will go back to Thailand and leave me and my sister here to work. When they are old, they won't have to work if I have a job.

The future breadwinner's role might sound harsh for a 13-year-old from the Finnish mainstream perspective on childhood and adolescence. Also, the immigrant adolescents themselves were explicitly pointing out and questioning their parents' culturally proscribed behavioral expectations of their children's proper behavior and individual autonomy. Recognizing different cultural codes of conduct and negotiating within and between them was commonplace for these adolescents. They recognized that their parents too had encountered challenges trying to balance between different cultural expectations. However, the most inflexible expectations and rules set by parents sometimes concerned the most sensitive choices of the adolescents' personal life. The ambivalence of respect, obedience, and pursuing one's own desires was evident in a 15-year-old Indian girl whose parents "raised me well" but worried that her parents would not approve if she were to "fall in love with [a] Finn or someone from another country than India."

Nonetheless, the relationship between children and their parents is context-bound, and at some level immigration experiences therefore provide commonalities on which these relations are constructed. For example, distinguishing one's own family from native Finnish families was common among 1.5-generation adolescents, who tended to perceive that native Finnish adolescents do not respect their parents. This perspective united immigrant adolescents with different backgrounds. Similarly, the perception that second-generation adolescents from one's

own ethnic group were very different from 1.5-generation adolescents may have helped to slow acculturation. A 16-year-old Somali girl, for example, indicated that “a boy or a girl born in Finland [is] very different” because they do not understand the culturally nuanced singularities commonly understood by, in her case, Somali girls.

Gratitude and indebtedness may then occur in adolescents’ talk on cultural maintenance and transformation. Immigration sometimes conflicted with the cultural understanding of intergenerational care and other potential responsibilities among adolescents. When this was the case, the emotions of gratitude and indebtedness often played important roles in maintaining adolescents’ commitment to their parents and to their parents’ wishes.

#### *Affection*

Reciprocity on an emotional level formed the third category of immigrant adolescents’ emotions of gratitude and indebtedness. Although we call this category *affection*, it also includes negative feelings toward parents. The ambivalence of intergenerational relations at the aggregate level was evident in that some of the adolescents’ statements included deep and meaningful praise of their parents (e.g., “My mother is wonderful. . . . She takes care of us [children] and if we have anything to ask, she answers honestly. [Iraqi girl, 14 years of age]), whereas others were more emotionally distant and conveyed annoyance toward their parents:

My mom wishes that I got great grades and that I would become an astronomer or something. And that I would love my mom when she’s old and ill and just all the time bring her some presents. Well that is not going to happen! (Russian boy, 15 years of age)

All in all, talk of gratitude or indebtedness categorized as *affection* was often only weakly connected to immigrant background. However, adolescents’ negative accounts were sometimes



connected to parents' country of origin and its childrearing practices. The Russian boy just quoted, for instance, perceived that although he and his mother shared a residence, they did not share the same language or a common understanding. These adolescents sometimes understood the lack of mutual understanding within intergenerational relations within the frame of migration, whereas a majority of them indicated that disagreements with their parents were due to their age phase and typical of families with the teenagers:

I talk the most with my mom because there's no one else to talk with [at home], but we have a more distant relationship nowadays. It is difficult to be straightforward anymore. [Interviewer: Why do you think that is?] Maybe it is because of this age. . . . We are just not that close anymore. (Thai boy, 15 years of age)

#### DISCUSSION

We examined how intergenerational relations with immigrant families are shaped by 1.5-generation immigrant adolescents' gratitude and indebtedness toward their parents. They evaluated their experiences in relation to parents' migration decision, intergenerational contract, and affection. The *migration decision* category was particularly related to migration context, whereas the categories of *intergenerational contract* and *affection* identified in the data described how adolescents' expressions of gratitude and indebtedness are influenced by perceived cultural differences and family members' integration process after migration. The results of this study offer an interpretative framework for these negotiations, which are often present in intergenerational relations with immigrant teenagers (Kwak, 2003).

Our results support previous studies that have recognized high levels of parental sacrifice and parental expectations as being integral to intergenerational relations in immigrant families

(Kang, 2010; Qin, 2008; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Going beyond the extant literature, we also observed these phenomena through the lenses of adolescents and accounted for their psychological ramifications in terms of adolescents' emotional states of gratitude and indebtedness. Specifically, in addition to showing how gratitude and indebtedness work in unison within parent–child relations among immigrant families, our findings also show how these two emotions can have divergent consequences, with gratitude strengthening intergenerational relations and indebtedness straining those relations by producing resentment for the sacrifice the parents chose to make on their children's behalf.

Our data illustrate how ambivalence within intergenerational relations exists in adolescents' experiences of gratitude and indebtedness. Previous research has noted that close relationships are shaped by ambivalent emotions (Pillemer & Lüscher, 2004). Expressions of both gratitude and indebtedness within an interview was common in our data, both by the same participants within a single interview and across participants who used different emotions to describe the same aspect of their parent–child relationships. Emotions and their contradicting nature are at the core of the main theories on intergenerational relations, such as the solidarity paradigm (Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997) and the framework of intergenerational ambivalence (Lüscher, 2004; Pillemer & Lüscher, 2004). Similarly, intergenerational conflict and intergenerational solidarity are the two dominant and often overlapping frameworks among studies on intergenerational relations in migration contexts (Kwak, 2003; Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Ambivalent emotions are a persistent component of close relationships (Pillemer & Lüscher, 2004), but transitions, such as migration, alter the balance in relationships and make ambivalent feelings more pronounced (Connidis, 2015; see also Lewis, 2008). The adolescents we interviewed demonstrated this ambivalence in

the perspectives they shared while talking about gratitude and indebtedness in their parent–child relations.

Given the simultaneous existence of positive and negative emotions, distinguishing between adolescents' accounts of gratitude and indebtedness was sometimes difficult. Gratitude has been defined as a pleasant emotional state (Watkins et al., 2006) that maintains close relationships (Algoe, 2012; Algoe et al., 2016). Our results are generally in line with this view. Adolescents' positive accounts of gratitude, which were rooted in commitment and perspective taking, were connected to parental sacrifices, reciprocal support, and loving and caring about one's parents. However, the 1.5-generation immigrant adolescents also framed their experiences within intergenerational relations after migration in a more critical light through their feelings of indebtedness, supporting the theoretical distinction made between gratitude and indebtedness (McCullough et al., 2008; Watkins et al., 2006). Although theoretically distinct, it thus seems that the emotions of gratitude and indebtedness intertwine and jointly shape the relationship between immigrant adolescents and their parents.

Gratitude and indebtedness toward parents have rarely been studied among non-Asian adolescents. Our findings from a diverse group of immigrant adolescents show that gratitude and indebtedness are not characteristics unique to families of Asian heritage (cf. Kang, 2010; Kang & Larson, 2014; Naito et al., 2005). Attributing family enmeshment after migration to immigrants' collectivistic cultures of origin may veil some important elements of gratitude that arise due the migration context given our finding that similar emotions are salient across various cultural groups. The adolescents' perceptions of the reasons behind their parents' migration decision are not dependent on their cultural background. In our data, children's educational prospects, for

instance, were among the primary rationales for the decision to migrate, according to children with different socioeconomic, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds (see also Qin, 2008).

Fuligni (1998) has noted that commitment to support family in the future is one component in defining family obligation among immigrant adolescents. From a developmental perspective, adolescence is an important period for the negotiation of autonomy-related changes in the parent–child relationship (Kagitcibasi, 2005; Steinberg, 2001). Those developmental changes in combination with migration can form a challenging context in which adolescents must navigate emotions of gratitude and indebtedness toward their parents. In the migration context, the so-called acculturation gap (i.e., discrepant acculturation level among family members of different generations) may further deepen communication difficulties between adolescents and their parents, as adolescents acquire the values and behavior of the dominant culture to a greater degree and speed than their parents (Birman, 2006; Kwak, 2003). It may well be that the emotions of both gratitude and indebtedness are triggered by the uneven process of acculturation that tends to occur across generations after migration. That is, parents who are not eager or capable of integrating into a new society as readily as their children may remind adolescents of their responsibility to take advantage of the new opportunities but to do so while maintaining their parents' values. The acculturation gap could precipitate conflict in the parent–child relationship, but the emotions of gratitude and indebtedness toward parents could moderate that conflict.

To conclude, our study contributes to research on intergenerational relations in immigrant families in three ways. First, the grounded theory approach offers a framework for a detailed exploration of the role of gratitude and indebtedness in intergenerational relations of immigrant families. The framework points out several gaps in the research on gratitude and

indebtedness within intergenerational relations by stressing the contextual nature and consequences of these emotions in the nuclear family contexts of immigrant adolescents. Second, our findings show how gratitude and indebtedness coexist and simultaneously frame the way adolescents perceive their family interactions. The existence of the ambivalence in intergenerational relations has been well documented in previous research (Connidis, 2015; Lüscher, 2004), and our results show how the ambivalence is inherent in 1.5-generation immigrant adolescents' experiences of gratitude and indebtedness toward their migrant parents. Third, our study highlights that adolescents' experiences of gratitude and indebtedness in intergenerational relations are common among 1.5-generation immigrants of various backgrounds.

#### *Implications for Practice*

In the present study, we have concentrated on emotions of gratitude and indebtedness to understand the dynamics of intergenerational relations following a shared migration experience. Better understanding of the ambiguous emotions that adolescents feel toward their parents after migration may help school personnel and social and health services tackle intergenerational conflicts in immigrant families. For instance, parent–child relations might be enhanced when adolescents interpret their parents' migration decision as a gift, as Kang (2010) has suggested, but the same interpretation might also result in unwanted pressure stemming from a sense of indebtedness that leads adolescents to drift apart from their parents. Speaking out about the ambivalent experiences and feelings adolescents may have toward their parents, their parents' choices, and the unspoken burdens they might feel could help to establish a healthy dialogue and mutual understanding within a family. Open dialog between the generations could be encouraged by school personnel at school and by medical professionals in health care settings.

In the school context, teachers, school psychologists, and school social workers should be aware that gratitude and indebtedness might relate to the so-called immigrant paradox, by which 1.5-generation adolescent immigrants earn better grades than their counterparts in second and third generations (García Coll et al., 2012). That is, 1.5-generation immigrant adolescents might succeed in school because of their parents' high expectations, but their psychological well-being may be compromised in the process (Qin, 2008). Negative outcomes associated with high parental expectations could be discussed with immigrant parents in the private conversations with school personnel, if needed. The starting point for building dialogue with immigrant parents should be to acknowledge that parents are most often acting in what they perceive to be their children's best interest, and they should not be judged for doing so. In addition, it is important to remember that open discussion on family relations outside the family—or even within the family—is not common in all cultures or in all families, and the topic should thus be broached carefully.

Reflecting and questioning one's own culture can be seen as part of the acculturation process (Foner, 1997). From an integration perspective, it is worth noting that emotional ambivalence may also be beneficial for integration; experiencing ambivalent emotions and recognizing cultural differences may help adolescents creatively combine different cultural values, and the tension that can arise in these circumstances can lead to change in intergenerational relations and successful immigrant family acculturation (Kuczynski, Navara, & Boiger, 2010, p. 185). Integration education for the newcomers, currently arranged by the municipalities in Finland, could thus better describe the typical changes in family dynamics after migration in their education materials.

Our findings have important implications outside the immigration context as well. Our data richly describe how teenagers ponder the moral questions of intergenerational care, weighing the merits of self-sacrifice in parent–child relations with a need for self-realization. Understanding how adolescents actively cope with ambivalent emotions toward their parents may be helpful for practitioners working with this age group, regardless of migrant status.

#### *Limitations and Future Directions*

A key limitation of our study is that as a cross-sectional interview study, we were unable to observe the development of the intergenerational relationships we sought to understand. Kang (2010), for instance, claimed that development of the sense of indebtedness among Korean immigrant adolescents in the United States fosters a better understanding of the immigrant-related sacrifices their parents made for them. In particular, this internalized sense of indebtedness often transitions from negative sentiment toward one’s parents in adolescence to a strengthened sense of filial obligation as development and maturation allow perspective-taking and a greater sense of appreciation for sacrifices made (Kang & Larson, 2014). However, the purpose of our study was to describe the experiences of 1.5-generation immigrant teenagers, and the ambiguity of their developmental stage was apparent in our findings.

Another important limitation is that the qualitative approach taken in this study did not allow comparisons between ethnic groups or generalization of our findings to a larger population. Also, because we have not interviewed nonimmigrant adolescents, we cannot interpret our interviewees’ talk about gratitude and indebtedness as defining intergenerational relations only in immigration context.

Our study was focused on adolescents’ accounts and *interpretations* of intergenerational relations after migration. According to our study participants, parents’ expectations and implicit

demand for reciprocity poignantly clashed with adolescents' aspirations to build a life of their own. Thus, many of these adolescents were uneasy and stressed about the burden of indebtedness. However, parental expectations perceived by these adolescents may not be congruent with parents' own intuited sense of expectations for their children. Parents' views on how gratitude and indebtedness are present in intergenerational relations after migration would be an important line for further research.

Future studies could also be designed to examine how the categories of migration, intergenerational contract, and affection vary according to different immigrant generations and reasons for immigration. We believe it is likely that a refugee background and exceptionally difficult premigration experiences affect adolescents' experiences of gratitude toward their parents. In addition to the traditional view of gratitude as an emotion toward those who help, gratitude can also be defined as a life orientation according to which one appreciates the positive aspects of life (Wood et al., 2010). This may be particularly true of adolescents with a refugee background; they may not question their parents' migration decision to the same extent as immigrant adolescents with other backgrounds. Finally, to capture and describe the negotiations of gratitude and indebtedness in intergenerational relations, future studies should study these emotions in both quantitative and qualitative research settings in real-life contexts.

#### CONCLUSION

Immigrant adolescents' decision-making about their future is bound to parents' migration decision years earlier. After migration, 1.5-generation immigrant adolescents have to negotiate not only between various cultural identities and values, but also between the emotions of gratitude and indebtedness toward their migrant parents. The conceptual framework developed in this study brings together the positive emotion of gratitude and the negative emotion of



indebtedness experienced by adolescents and shows how, along with the often-occurring ambivalence of these emotions, gratitude serves and indebtedness challenges intergenerational relations after migration.

#### AUTHOR NOTE

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Table 1

*Summary of Subcategories*

Gratitude				Indebtedness			
Subcategory	Related concepts and definition	<i>n</i>	%	Subcategory	Related concepts and definition	<i>n</i>	%
Parents' sacrifices ("They have gone through a lot.")	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Parents' have sacrificed a lot when migrating</li> <li>- Family and friend relations in a country of origin</li> <li>- Declined social status (worse or no job, no social networks)</li> <li>- Admiring parents' persistence</li> </ul>	12	27	Demand of paying back ("They expect me to become something big.")	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Parents' oversized expectations about adolescents' speed of learning a new language</li> <li>- school grades and potential professional career</li> <li>- capability of taking care of the parents and/or extended family</li> </ul>	25	56
Common family aims ("They help and support you and you should do the same.")	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Adolescents and their parents work together for a common goal</li> <li>- Good education for the kids</li> <li>- Doing your best, respecting parents</li> <li>- Adolescents' help their parents as much as they can</li> <li>- Family first, team spirit</li> </ul>	22	49	Following parents' culture and ideas ("For all the good my parents have done for me, I don't want to disappoint them.")	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Uneasiness about finding a balance between old and new culture</li> <li>- Adolescents' try to show their parents' that they are able to respect and maintain their own culture in a new environment</li> <li>- Parents' consider adolescents are abandoning their own culture</li> <li>- Wishing to gain more autonomy</li> </ul>	16	36

Empathy and care (“I am sad when my mom is sad.”)	Adolescents’ are grateful for their parents’ care and company - Happy to see positive changes migration has brought to parents (e.g., better well-being, better earnings) - Caring and importance of the parents	17 38	Clinging parents (“At some point, I will have my own family.”)	Parents’ don’t have their own life - Parents’ lean too much on their children - Parents’ well-being has declined after migration, and they miss their home country	7 16
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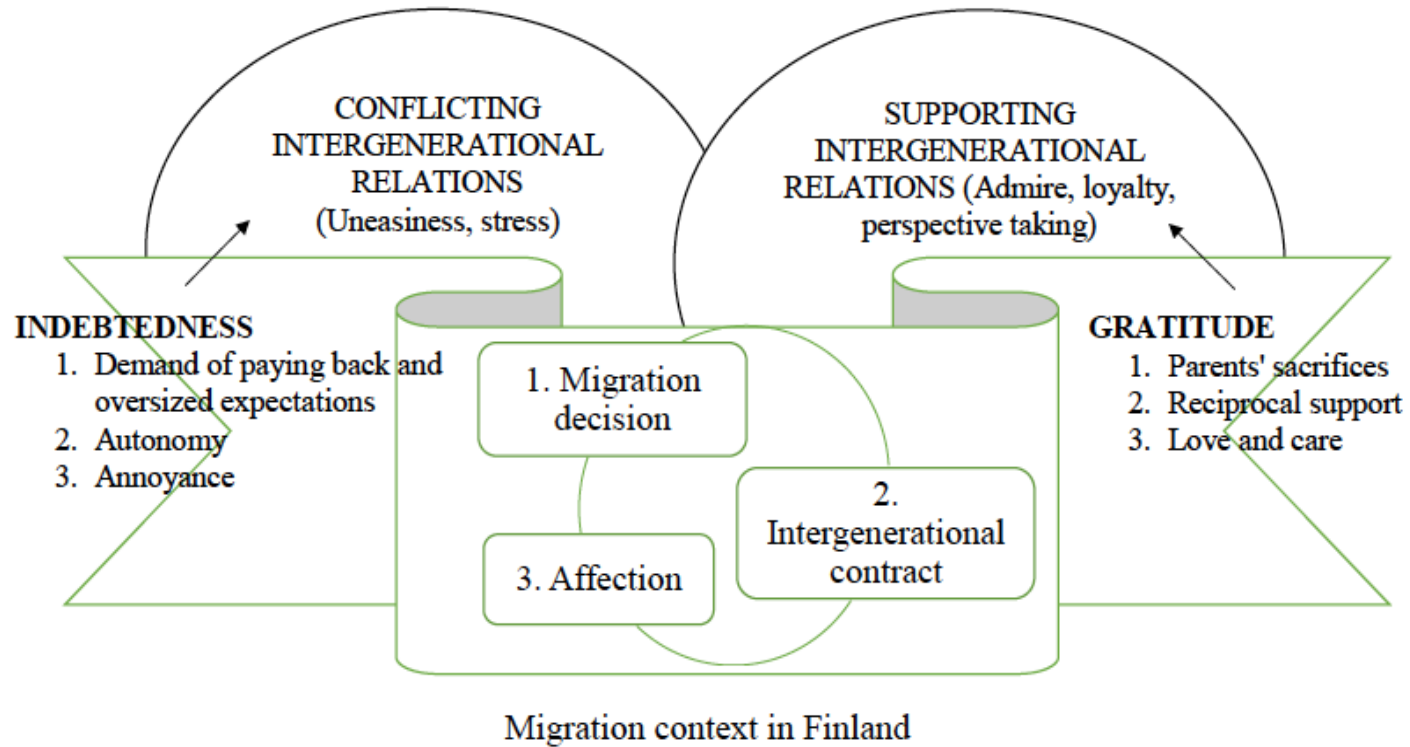


Figure 1. An evolving theory of gratitude and indebtedness toward parents experienced by adolescents after family migration.



## Appendix

## Interview Questions

## 1. Background questions and introduction of the research

- Who are your family members?
- With whom do you live?
- How long have you been in Finland?
- How well do you know Finnish?
- Which languages do you use at home?

## 2. Migration

- From where you have moved to Finland?
- Where were your parents born?
- Are you aware of the reasons for your family's migration?
- Who made the decision to emigrate?
- Was your opinion asked, how were you and your siblings informed?
- What kind of memories do you retain from your country of origin? What about the migration process?
- What were your first impressions of Finland? What was the most difficult thing in the beginning? Was there something that helped you in the beginning?
- How did you perceive your parents' integration process? What has been difficult for them? What has helped them (if facing difficulties)?
- How well do your parents know Finnish/Swedish?

- Has the migration decision been a good decision for your family? Why or why not? What about for yourself? Why or why not?

### 3. Family

- Do you live with the same people as you did before the migration?
- Where do your family members live?
- Are you in contact with your family members? In what manner?
- If you think about your family's everyday life now and before migration, how has it changed?
- What did your parents do for living in your country of origin?
- What do your parents do for living now?
- What has changed after migration? What is new? Are there things that were part of your life before migration but not anymore?
- Have the relations in your family changed because of migration (between you and your parents, between your mother and father, between you and your siblings)? How?

### 4. Parenting

- Describe your mother/father in two words.
- Has migration changed your mother/father?
- What kind of things do you and your parents do together?
- When and where do you ask for your parents' advice?
- Can your parents support you in things you wish them to?
- Have you encountered situations in which you wished your parents could have supported you more?
- Can you talk to your parents about difficult things in your life?

- Are there things you wouldn't share with your parents?
- Are there things in your relationship with your parents that you wish were different?
- If you wouldn't ask for advice from your parents, who you would turn to?
- Parents often have worries. What are the things that worry your parents most?
- How would you describe the way your parents have raised you? Has this changed after migration? If so, how? Would you raise your own children in the same way?
- What things, if any, do you disagree about with your parents?
- What do your parents expect from you?
- Do your parents have difficulties understanding how your life is in Finland?
- How is your youth different from that of your parents?

#### 5. School

- Has the school personnel contacted your parents? If so, when and why?
- Have your parents contacted your school? If so, when and why?
- Do your parents use Wilma [electronic student administration program]?
- In your opinion, how much should school personnel and parents be in contact with each other?
- Do your parents understand your school activities and how the Finnish school system works?
- Do you tell your parents about your education? If something unpleasant happens, do you tell your parents about it at home?
- Do your parents follow your education?
- Are your parents able to help you with your homework?

## 6. Future

- What are your goals for the future?
- Do you have a dream profession?
- Do you have a role model/someone you admire?
- Whose opinions do you value?
- Where do you see yourself living when you grow up?
- Are you satisfied with your current life?
- What is important for you?
- Are there currently any things in your life that worry you?
- What worries you about the future?
- Are you satisfied with how you and your family have managed your life in Finland after migration? What are the good things? What would you like to see improve in the future?