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Exploring the Potential of Analyzing Ethnic Differences in the Life Course of Young People: Insights from z-proso Data

Findings from the Zurich Longitudinal Study on Youth Development
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Introduction

The *Zurich Project on the Social Development of Children and Youth (z-proso)*, initiated in 2004, tracks over 1,300 children in Zurich through childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood.



It provides key insights into how ethnic and migration backgrounds shape youth development.



Importance of Ethnic and Migration Differences

Understanding ethnic and migration differences is crucial, as factors such as **discrimination**, **language barriers**, **socioeconomic status**, and **cultural conflicts** significantly impact youth experiences and outcomes (Phinney, 1990; Seaton, Yip, & Sellers, 2009).

Participation and Recruitment in the z-proso Project

Recruitment challenges

z-proso faced difficulties in recruiting some ethnic groups, particularly **Albanian** and **Tamil-speaking** families (Eisner & Ribeaud, 2007). Participation was lower due to **distrust in research**, as previously noted by Garcia Coll et al. (1996).

Efforts to improve participation

The project addressed these challenges by providing **multilingual materials** and recruiting **bilingual interviewers**, resulting in improved participation rates among underrepresented groups.

Ethnic Representation and Participation Rates

Participation rates varied significantly by ethnicity in the *z-proso* cohort. **Albanian** and **Portuguese** families initially participated less than **German-speaking Swiss** families, likely due to cultural barriers and distrust in research (Eisner & Ribeaud, 2007).

These findings underscore the need for **targeted outreach** and **inclusive recruitment strategies** to ensure that studies like *z-proso* reflect the diversity of urban populations.

Ethnic and Migration Differences in Behavior

Aggressive behavior

- *Averdijk et al. (2011)* found that children with a migration background exhibited **lower levels of aggression** than their Swiss peers, indicating possible protective cultural influences.
- **Teacher-student relationships** played a key role in reducing aggression across ethnic groups (Obsuth et al., 2017). These findings support the broader research that emphasizes the importance of school relationships in social integration (Archambault et al., 2024; Ialuna et al., 2024).

Oppositional behavior

- *Valdebenito et al. (2022)* noted that teacher-student bonds were particularly effective in reducing oppositional behavior among boys, regardless of ethnic background. This demonstrates how positive relationships in school can mitigate externalizing behaviors.


Ethnic and Migration Differences in Mental Health

Anxiety and depression

Migrant children were found to report **higher levels of anxiety and depression** than their Swiss peers (Averdijk et al., 2011), in line with the **acculturative stress model** (Berry et al., 2006), which links adaptation pressures to internalizing problems.

Suicidal ideation and self-injury

Zhu et al. (2022) found a link between bullying victimization and suicidal ideation, although the study did not specifically analyze ethnic differences. **Stevens et al. (2008)** observed similar trends, where migrant children displayed higher internalizing symptoms due to cultural adaptation stressors.



Mental Health and Emotional Instability

Emotional instability

- Emotional instability, or **emotional lability**, was identified by **Zhu et al. (2024)** as a predictor of depression, anxiety, and aggression. While no ethnic differences were found, research by **Berry et al. (2006)** suggests that emotional instability might be exacerbated by the stress of acculturation in migrant youth.

Daily affective dynamics

- **Emotional lability** was linked to increased symptoms of **ADHD** and **reactive aggression**, underscoring the need to focus on emotional regulation in interventions for migrant youth.

Ethnic and Migration Differences in Substance Use

Polysubstance use

- *Steinhoff et al. (2022)* found that adolescents from migrant families were **less likely** to engage in polysubstance use compared to their Swiss peers. This challenges the stereotype of higher risk behaviors in migrant youth and suggests cultural and familial protective factors.

Cannabis use

- In their 2024 study, *Steinhoff et al.* found that youth from **former Yugoslavian** and **Asian** migrant backgrounds reported lower cannabis use. Cultural and religious values, particularly in **Muslim** and **Christian** families, were key protective factors, aligning with findings by **Guo & Metcalfe (2019)**, who emphasized the role of religious norms in reducing substance use.

Ethnic and Migration Differences in Educational Outcomes

Obsuth et al. (2017) demonstrated that positive teacher-student relationships were essential for reducing behavioral issues and improving educational outcomes across all ethnic groups.

Zhou & Bankston (1994) similarly argued that **social capital** — supportive relationships with teachers and other adults — plays a critical role in the educational success of migrant youth.

Key Findings and Implications

Behavior. Migrant youth often display **lower aggression** and **substance use**, with protective factors such as **cultural and religious norms**.

Mental health. Higher levels of **anxiety** and **depression** are prevalent among migrant youth, but strong **teacher-student relationships** and emotional regulation can mitigate these effects.

Educational outcomes. Supportive **teacher-student bonds** are critical across ethnic groups in promoting better educational and behavioral outcomes.

These findings suggest that **culturally sensitive interventions** and policies focusing on **school-based relationships** are vital for supporting migrant youth.

Limitations of Current Research

Underrepresentation of specific ethnic groups. Despite efforts, ethnic minorities remain underrepresented in the *z-proso* sample (Eisner & Ribeaud, 2007).

Lack of ethnic-specific analyses. Most studies focus on broad "migrant vs. non-migrant" comparisons, limiting insights into specific ethnic group differences (Averdijk et al., 2011; Zhu et al., 2022).

Cross-cultural measurement issues. Variations in how different ethnic groups interpret survey questions pose challenges in ensuring **measurement equivalence** (Eisner & Ribeaud, 2007).

Potential for Improved Analysis

- 1. Granular ethnic group analysis.** Future research should disaggregate "migrant background" to explore differences between specific ethnic and cultural youth.
- 2. Improved measurement tools.** Cross-cultural adaptation of surveys to reflect different cultural norms will ensure more accurate assessments of behavior and mental health.
- 3. Mixed-methods approaches.** Including qualitative research, such as interviews or focus groups, can offer richer, context-driven insights into the lived experiences of migrant youth.

Concluding remarks

The *z-proso* project offers a valuable longitudinal perspective on the impact of ethnic and migration backgrounds on youth development. Future research must focus on improving ethnic-specific analyses and employing more nuanced methodologies to capture the complexities of cultural identity and adaptation.



By doing so, we can better inform interventions and policies that promote the well-being and success of migrant youth in multicultural settings



Q&A

Questions?

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Thank you!
