

Younger immigrants adjust to a new culture faster than do older immigrants

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learning the cultural rules and meanings of your new home is especially challenging. A new study published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, finds that this process is easier for children, but quickly becomes more difficult after about the age of 15.

Psychological scientists have found that many aspects of learning and development have a critical window—if a developmental event doesn't happen by a particular age, it never will. For example, learning perfect pitch or learning to see with stereo vision.

Steven Heine, a professor of cultural psychology at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, wondered if this was also true for acculturation—the process of learning the culture in a new place. He cowrote the study with two students, both [immigrants](#) to Canada: Maciej Chudek, who came from Poland, via Australia, and Benjamin Y. Cheung, who came from Hong Kong.

The researchers surveyed 232 people who had emigrated from Hong Kong to Vancouver at various ages, from infancy to age 50. At the time of the survey, the people were ages 18 to 60. They were asked how much they identified with their heritage culture and with Canadian culture—for example, how much they agreed with statements like, "I like watching North American movies" or "It is important for me to maintain or develop the practices of my heritage culture."

For people who had immigrated to Canada before the age of 15, they identified more with Canadian culture with each successive year they lived there than did people who had immigrated when they were older. In other words, the younger they were at the time of immigration, the quicker they came to identify with Canada. People who immigrated after the age of 25 seemed to identify less with Canada the longer they were there.

"It suggests that acculturation really is a difficult experience. It's not something that people can easily accomplish," Heine says. "Our cultures fundamentally shape the ways that we think, so a change in cultures is a big event, especially if you've been in that one [culture](#) throughout your childhood."

The experience of one of the authors provides a tiny piece of anecdotal evidence that younger children adjust faster: While Cheung, who immigrated to Canada from Hong Kong at age 8, plays hockey like a stereotypical Canadian, his older cousin, who was 14 when the family immigrated, does not.

More information: The researchers are now using the internet to recruit immigrants who have come to North America from all over the world for another study, to see if the same applies for people from other cultures. For more information, please visit their website:

www.metalab.psych.ubc.ca/AcculturationStudy/

Provided by Association for Psychological Science

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