The Costs of Getting Ahead: Mexican Family System Changes After Immigration*

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Abstract: This study explored how immigration influenced Mexican family relationships. Qualitative interviews were conducted with 12 adolescents and 14 parents from 10 undocumented Mexican families. Participants immigrated to North Carolina within the past 7 years. A conceptual model derived from the data using grounded theory methods suggested that, after immigration, parents had less time to spend with children because of demanding new jobs and mothers entering the work force. Decreased time as a family was associated with adolescents' loneliness, isolation, and risk-taking behavior. In response to perceived environmental threats, Mexican parents became authoritarian, precipitating parent-adolescent conflict. Parent-adolescent acculturation gaps were viewed as an asset as adolescents helped parents navigate within the new cultural system. Families coped with postimmigration changes by maintaining high levels of familism and enacting cultural traditions.

Key Words: acculturation, familism, family systems, Latinos, migration.

Mexico, lindo y querido, si muero lejos de ti, por siempre te extranare. Para siempre. [Mexico, beautiful and beloved, if I die far away from you, know that I will always miss you. Always.]— Yariela, Mexican female adolescent, age 12, living in United States for 1 year

Researchers from the Pew Hispanic Center estimate that 11 million undocumented individuals currently live in the United States; a 30% increase from the 8.4 million estimated in 2000. Six million of these undocumented individuals are Mexican. The same researchers estimate that one sixth of this population, or 1.7 million people, are younger than 18 years (Passel, 2005). Although there is clearly a large group of undocumented Mexicans living in the United States, we know little about these families and how they function. It is important to learn more about the unique challenges faced by undocumented families who, compared to legal immigrants or refugees, live in fear of deportation and cannot easily travel back and forth to Mexico.

Most of the research on Latino immigration, acculturation, and adjustment has been conducted with adults, leaving us with scant information on adolescents and even less on family relationships (García Coll & Magnuson, 2001). Little attention has been given to the *1.5 generation*, that is, children and adolescents who were born and socialized in a foreign country and subsequently immigrated to the United States (Hirschman, 1994; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Notwithstanding the emphasis that acculturation research has placed on comparisons between different generations within immigrant families (e.g., U.S.-born children vs. their immigrant parents), these 1.5 generation children arguably experience the most upheaval of the family system and are most likely to either become bicultural or get caught between cultural systems (García Coll & Magnuson; Hirschman).

This study focused on understanding family system dynamics in undocumented Mexican families and the changes that parents and adolescents experience after immigration. We contribute to the body

of knowledge on Latino immigrant families by exploring three fundamental questions that have not received adequate attention in the previous research on undocumented Mexican immigrant families: (a) how do undocumented Mexican families change after immigration, (b) how do these changes affect family members and their interactions, and (c) what factors explain postimmigration family system adjustment in undocumented families?

The immigration experience and stressors that arise therein such as learning a new language, finding jobs, and coping with discrimination can lead to both acculturation stress and familial stress. Depending upon the reasons for relocation, as well as the exiting and entering environments, immigrant families often experience significant upheaval during migration, shifts in socioeconomic status, loss of social networks, and disorienting cultural changes in the new land (Hernandez & McGoldrick, 1999). We sought to delineate how these challenges influence undocumented Mexican family system functioning and family relationships.

Past research suggests that after immigration (a) acculturation differences (i.e., gaps) between parents and adolescent children precipitate family stress (Hernandez & McGoldrick, 1999; Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1980) and (b) the strong sense of family cohesion (i.e., familism) many Mexican families arrive with erodes over time (Cortes, 1995; Rogler & Cooney, 1984). These changes may be considered what we currently know about the "costs" of getting ahead in the United States. However, few studies have used qualitative data to examine the processes behind these family system dynamics. The following sections describe sensitizing concepts—acculturation gaps and the erosion of familism—that provided a foundation for the present study.

Acculturation Gaps

Normative conflicts between parents and adolescents can be exacerbated by acculturation stress, creating intercultural as well as intergenerational difficulties between family members (Coatsworth, Pantin, & Szapocznik, 2002). Children commonly acculturate faster than adults, creating an acculturation gap between generations that precipitates family stress (Hernandez & McGoldrick, 1999; Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1980). Because of this cultural clash, Latino families' external boundaries often become rigid to preserve culture of origin beliefs and norms (Hernandez &

McGoldrick). This conflict can fuel adolescent rebellion, alienate parents and adolescents, and contribute to the development of adolescent behavioral problems (Coatsworth et al., 2002; Szapocznik, Santisteban, Kurtines, Perez-Vidal, & Hervis 1986).

Familism

Familism involves a deeply ingrained sense of the individual being inextricably rooted in the family. The term encompasses attitudes, behaviors, and family structures within an extended family system and is believed to be one of the most important factors influencing the lives of Latinos (Cooley, 2001; Parra-Cardona, Bulock, Imig, Villarruel, & Gold, 2006). This strong sense of family orientation, obligation, and cohesion has noteworthy protective effects. For example, Cooley found familism to be an important factor associated with less child maltreatment in both Latino and non-Latino families. Gil, Wagner, and Vega (2000) reported familism to have a highly significant, negative association with acculturation stress, though this relationship was stronger for immigrant Latino adolescents than it was for U.S.-born Latino adolescents.

Familism is thought to decrease as acculturation progresses. Cortes (1995) found levels of familism decreased with higher levels of education and were higher for children and adolescents who were older when they arrived in the United States. Rogler and Cooney (1984) found that second generation adult children were less familistic than their first generation parents.

To summarize, current research on Latino families suggests that acculturation gaps between family members contribute to intergenerational stress, and familism tends to erode over time spent in the United States. These sensitizing concepts further underscore the need for the present study.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants. The first author conducted in-depth, semistructured interviews with 10 undocumented Mexican immigrant families. Families were recruited from Latino communities in North Carolina as a part of a large mixed-methods study (Bacallao & Smokowski, 2005). Recruitment was conducted through

churches, English as a Second Language programs, and at Latino community events. The 10 participating families consisted of undocumented Mexican immigrants with adolescents who were born in Mexico and had come to the United States in late childhood or adolescence. Within these 10 families, one adolescent and one parent were interviewed. In two of the families, two adolescent siblings were interviewed. Both parents were interviewed in four of the families, fathers only in three, and mothers only in the remaining three. Interviews provided qualitative data on 12 adolescents and 14 parents. Interviews were conducted with seven mothers and seven fathers, lasted 4–5 hr, and were conducted in the participants' homes in Spanish, the participants' preferred language. Participants' names were changed to protect confidentiality.

On average, adolescents were 14 years of age and had been in the United States for an average of 4 years when interviews were conducted in 2004. Forty percent (4 of 10) of the undocumented families had mothers and fathers who obtained only an elementary school education in Mexico, although 30% (3 of 10) of the families had at least one parent who had attended some high school in Mexico. The remaining 30% of families had at least one mother or father who had graduated from high school in Mexico. All of the families had two parents and lived in trailer parks or crowded apartment buildings. The average annual family income was $21,000.

Interview protocol and analyses. The semistructured interview protocol contained open-ended questions. To prompt participants to discuss acculturation, family members were asked the following questions: "In what ways are you Mexican? In what ways are you American?" To solicit information on coping and adaptation, family members were asked: "What have you overcome? What has it been like for you to adjust to life in the U.S.?" The following questions were asked to prompt participants to discuss personal and interpersonal relationship changes: "What is your relationship like with your parents (for parents: with your adolescent child) since you've been here? How have you (for parents: has your child) changed since coming to the U.S.?" These semistructured interview questions often generated lengthy narratives that were the focus of our analyses.

Parents were interviewed first, enabling them to hear the questions that their child would be asked. In every participating family, parents allowed the first author to privately interview their adolescent child. Consequently, all interviews occurred separately so that parents and adolescents did not influence one another's answers. All interviews were conducted in Spanish and translated into English during transcription by the first author.

This study used grounded theory methods (GTM) for the analyses of interview data (Charmaz, 2000). We specifically sought to explain undocumented Mexican family system adjustment after immigration, using GTM to build a conceptual model from "concepts" and "indicators" that emerged from the data (LaRossa, 2005). We used Atlas/ti version 4.1 for Windows to code text files. Following the stages of analyses in ground theory, we used open, axial, and selective coding to derive the concepts and indicators in the conceptual model (LaRossa).

During open coding, the authors broke the text down into discrete parts or units of analyses called concepts. In vivo coding was carried out similarly when participants' own words were used as a code or concept. For example, an adolescent saying "I just can't stop thinking about how my life was in Mexico" was coded "thinking about the past after immigration" during open coding; whereas a mother saying "family separations made us do things differently" initiated an in vivo code called "family separations." Open and in vivo codes were clustered into more abstract categories or variables with multiple indicators theoretically saturating each category (LaRossa, 2005). Our sensitizing concepts, familism and acculturation gaps, surfaced as open codes and categories.

Axial coding followed open and in vivo coding by examining relationships between and among categories or variables (Charmaz, 2000). Using the constant comparison method, we compared codes, concepts, and categories from different adolescents, parents, and families to examine their universality and to identify cases where they did not fit. Code notes, theory notes, and process notes were kept in memos attached to the data files to record the potential relationships between codes and categories (Parra-Cardona et al., 2006). Finally, selective coding was used to craft the story line (LaRossa, 2005). In our case, the story line emerged as articulating the costs of getting ahead and how undocumented Mexican families coped with these costs. A conceptual model was finalized to describe postimmigration adjustment in undocumented Mexican families, and exemplars were identified to illustrate the concepts and indicators in the final model.

Trustworthiness of the analysis. Qualitative researchers emphasize rigor in their studies by examining trustworthiness of the results. Triangulation of methods, sources, analysts, and perspectives are strategies for enhancing credibility in qualitative research (Patton, 2002). In this study, we used all of these triangulation methods. We triangulated information from multiple sources in the interviews with adolescents and their parents. Informal discussions with participating families after the interviews confirmed what was included in the formal interviews. With 7 of 10 families, the first author talked with both parents when the interviews were completed, gaining multiple perspectives from the same family. She also spoke with five siblings. These conversations were documented in field notes, providing multiple perspectives from which we could view the data.

In addition, as part of a large mixed-methods study, the authors discussed themes from the qualitative analyses with research staff who conducted quantitative assessments to confirm themes and integrate feedback. We shared our conceptual model with consultants and audiences at local, state, and national conferences to gain insights from other professionals working with undocumented Mexican families.

Positionality. Qualitative researchers believe that it is critical to understand and make overt the positionality, or personal beliefs and biases, brought to the research endeavor (Patton, 2002). The first author, who conducted the interviews and led the analyses, is a bicultural mental health social worker with an emphasis on the importance of family and social support, qualities that influenced her positionality. In every interview except for one, she went beyond the interview protocol to provide guidance, information, and links to local resources. We believe that this positionality enhanced the study by encouraging families to provide detailed information about their experiences.

Results

Figure 1 shows the conceptual model generated in the GTM analyses. The bold titles within each box are abstract concepts underpinned by the indicators shown in each bulleted list. These concepts and indicators were salient for all of the families for both adolescent and parent data. Each concept and indicators cluster captured at least 20 single-spaced pages of thick description text from the families; the overall model characterizes over 200 pages of thick description. All of the concept and indicators clusters were associated with overall adjustment in the undocumented Mexican families. This conceptual model of postimmigration undocumented Mexican family adjustment guides the presentation of findings. We use exemplars from adolescents and parents to illustrate each element in the model. As stated above, pseudonyms are used in quotations.

The Context of Getting Ahead

Relocation as a Means to "Grow Toward the Light"

The Mexican families interviewed for this study immigrated to the United States for two primary reasons. First, all of the families thought better job opportunities existed in the United States to support their family members who immigrated and those who stayed in Mexico. Four families wanted to save enough money to return to Mexico to start businesses. All of the families discussed escaping chronic poverty in Mexico and considered the most basic living conditions in the United States a marked improvement. The second reason for relocation was to seek a better future for their children, to try to "get our children ahead." Getting children ahead meant educating them in the United States and having them learn English to enhance future opportunities. This was an organizing theme for all of the parents, making immigration-related difficulties worthwhile. Future dreams for children provided inspiration during stressful times. One mother offered this metaphor:

> Diocelina (mother): I did not come here [to the U.S.] to become rich. I didn't even come here to be happy, no. I came here to get my children ahead. I tell my children that we came here for them, and to become better persons. We work like burros here. This is not a happier life. My father told me when I was seven that everything grows towards the light. We are here to grow towards the light even when we think that darkness surrounds us. In this family, under these circumstances, we are seeds in the soil trying to grow towards the light.

The Costs of Getting Ahead

There were significant costs associated with the possibility for getting ahead. Immigration brought serious family system changes along with economic opportunities in the United States and enhanced prospects for children's futures.

Family Separations

Life without "a boss": Sequential immigration and shifting family roles. Having family members immigrate at different times (i.e., sequential immigration) was a common experience that disrupted family functioning. Eight fathers relocated first in order to find work and lay the groundwork for bringing other family members. The fathers contributed as much as they could to the family in Mexico by sending money home. At the same time, family homeostasis or equilibrium, members' roles, and patterns of functioning were influenced by the father's absence.

The severity of separation problems appeared to depend upon the length of the separation. When the separation was short, 6 months to a year, families said they were able to cope with the stress. In the father's absence, mothers and children typically lived with and received support from extended family members. Although families originally believed that the separation from the father would last only a year, in six of eight families the separation lasted considerably longer (3 years or more). Fathers did not return to visit the family because of their undocumented legal status, the inherent risk in being smuggled across the border, and the high cost of the travel—reported to be $4,000 for one undocumented person. Family members said that long separations brought significant changes in family roles and patterns of functioning, contributing to family stress.

In the father's absence, the family left behind restructured itself and established new patterns of functioning. In three families, both parents immigrated, leaving their children with grandparents, aunts, or uncles. The loss of key parent relationships sometimes allowed adolescents, especially young males, to drift into high-risk situations, such as getting involved with antisocial peers or in illegal activities. Adolescents said these separations prompted the family to reconfigure itself around the single parent or surrogate parents that remained—a dynamic that was helpful for coping with the absence, but one that commonly created difficulties when the family was reunited. One adolescent male, Manuel, reported that he became strongly attached to his resilient mother during his father's absence. Manuel described his mother as the greatest influence in his life. His relationship with his father after separation was never the same.

> Manuel (male adolescent): My mom probably influenced me the most. I got really close to her when my dad wasn't with me. She was like the head of the family, and somehow, even though my dad's with us now, that's never been restored. She's still the head of this family. Nothing against him, it's just the way she is as a figure head. We grew up with her for six years while Dad was here [in the U.S.]. She takes charge.

Another adolescent male experienced the same intense bonding with his mother. His parents divorced after immigrating. The father returned to Mexico to get the boy when he heard that his son stopped going to school and was associating with delinquent peers. Father, son, and the father's second wife began to live together for the first time in 8 years. The son explained the difficulties he experienced in the situation.

> Jaime (male adolescent): We were separated seven or eight years. When I was . . . six, he [the father] left [for the U.S]. And he returned to get me when I was 13. I had little memory of him when he came back. Even though it's been 3 years that I'm here with him, it's still difficult for me to adapt to him, his way of being. Now I finally know how to control things better. Back there [in Mexico], there was no boss. My older brother was here. My stepfather was living in Chicago. There was no boss. It was difficult adjusting to a boss in this house. He told me when I got here that he was the boss. He didn't talk. But he would tell me to talk to my brother. Call my mother [in Chicago]. Talk to my sister. With my mother, I had a lot of trust. My father was more closed. I couldn't talk with him like I do with my mother. Well, he would tell me one thing: Use condoms . . .. That would be the only thing
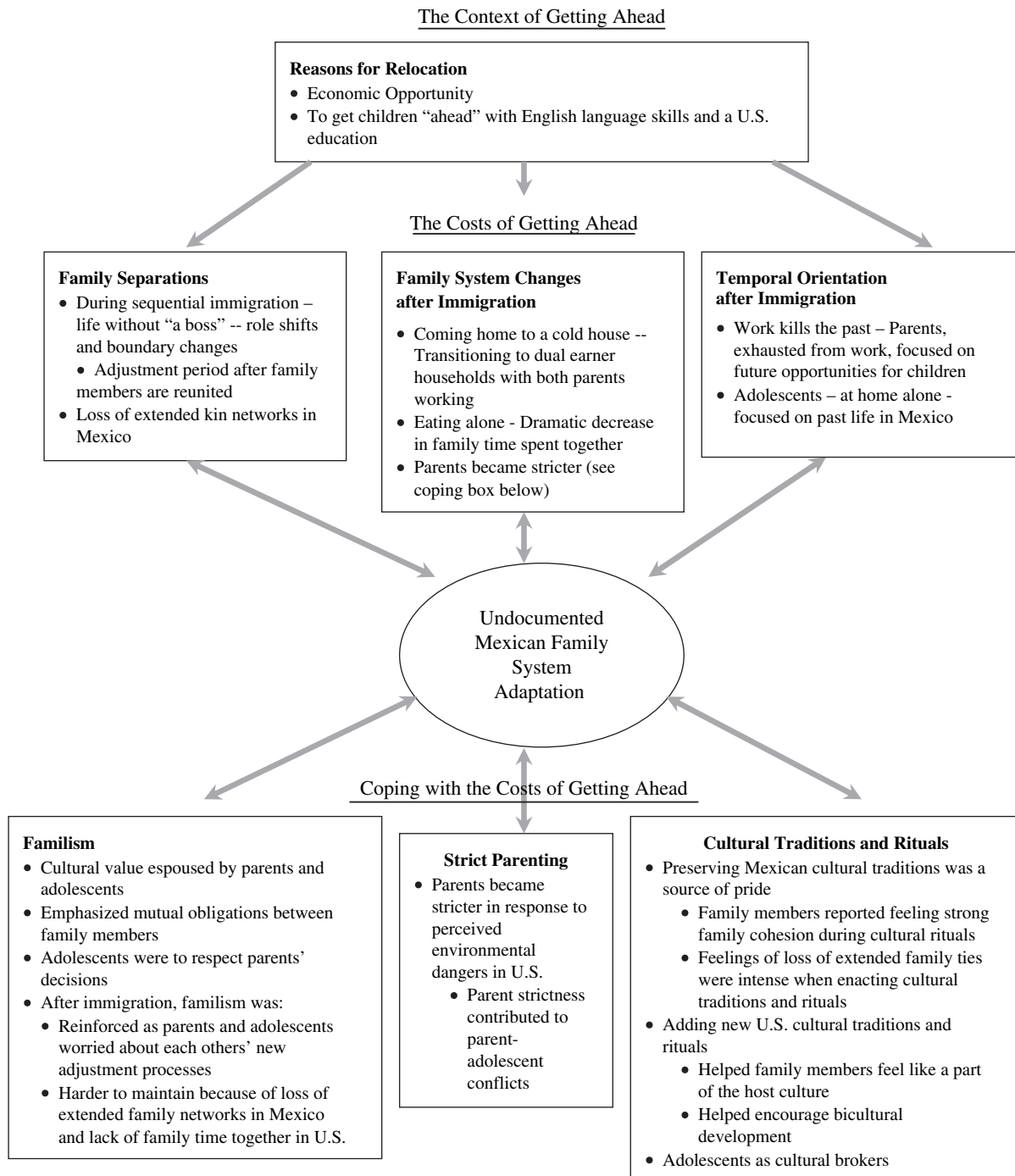
The Context of Getting Ahead

Reasons for Relocation
- Economic Opportunity
- To get children "ahead" with English language skills and a U.S. education

The Costs of Getting Ahead

Family Separations
- During sequential immigration – life without "a boss" -- role shifts and boundary changes
  - Adjustment period after family members are reunited
- Loss of extended kin networks in Mexico

Family System Changes after Immigration
- Coming home to a cold house -- Transitioning to dual earner households with both parents working
- Eating alone - Dramatic decrease in family time spent together
- Parents became stricter (see coping box below)

Temporal Orientation after Immigration
- Work kills the past – Parents, exhausted from work, focused on future opportunities for children
- Adolescents – at home alone - focused on past life in Mexico

Undocumented Mexican Family System Adaptation

Coping with the Costs of Getting Ahead

Familism
- Cultural value espoused by parents and adolescents
- Emphasized mutual obligations between family members
- Adolescents were to respect parents' decisions
- After immigration, familism was:
  - Reinforced as parents and adolescents worried about each others' new adjustment processes
  - Harder to maintain because of loss of extended family networks in Mexico and lack of family time together in U.S.

Strict Parenting
- Parents became stricter in response to perceived environmental dangers in U.S.
  - Parent strictness contributed to parent-adolescent conflicts

Cultural Traditions and Rituals
- Preserving Mexican cultural traditions was a source of pride
  - Family members reported feeling strong family cohesion during cultural rituals
  - Feelings of loss of extended family ties were intense when enacting cultural traditions and rituals
- Adding new U.S. cultural traditions and rituals
  - Helped family members feel like a part of the host culture
  - Helped encourage bicultural development
- Adolescents as cultural brokers

Figure 1. Getting Ahead: Mexican Family Systems After Immigration.

he'd tell me. My mother would explain everything to me . . .. I haven't developed that sense of trust with anyone else . . .. I'm still getting to know my father.

Once families were reunited after immigration, they described an adjustment period in which structural changes created new configurations of roles, boundaries, and communication processes, as well as a stormy period after reuniting. In three families, the father would argue with his wife, yell, and use foul language when speaking with the children. Family members, especially mothers, said that it took at least 1 year to readjust to living with each other. Others, like Jaime, said they were still struggling to readjust to family changes.

The loss of extended kin in Mexico. In addition to family separations during sequential immigration, there were also separations between family members who immigrated and extended kin who remained in Mexico. Given the importance many Mexicans place on familism, adolescents and parents said that the loss of close relationships with extended family members (e.g., grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins) was hard to bear. Parents missed the companionship, support, and help extended family members provided. They also worried about aging relatives in Mexico and were limited in their ability to go back to visit. One father said that he felt closer to his daughter because they had only their nuclear family in this country; this was an uncommon contrasting view. All the other parents and adolescents said they missed the extensive family support that characterized their lives in Mexico. Adolescents reported missing family members in Mexico as much as or more than their parents. For adolescents, the family members remaining in Mexico were strongly linked to memories of childhood in Mexico, especially if the relatives had served as surrogate parents during sequential immigration family separations. During the difficulties of adjusting to life in the United States, most adolescents thought of happy times with family members in Mexico. This focus on the past made adolescents feel ambivalent about their new lives in America.

> Elena (female adolescent): The United States . . . I think of it with many dollars but the people are sad. You have everything, but you don't have your family. It's not like in Mexico where you visit with your grandparents and your other relatives. In Mexico, you don't have money but you're much better because you're with your family. I know that my parents do this for our well-being, so we're here. But I think all the people in Mexico are happy because they are with their family. You see, here, it is mostly sadness. I feel like crying instead of feeling good. We used to always be with my family, that's who I miss.

Thinking about loved ones left behind saddened adolescents, making some adolescents yearn to return to Mexico. Nostalgic memories were particularly enticing when adolescents felt lonely, isolated, and friendless. These memories and attachments sustained one adolescent during the difficult adjustment to life in America when she was depressed and suicidal. The interviewer asked if she was thinking of hurting herself.

> Teresa (female adolescent): Sometimes—I've felt that way when I feel shut in, when there are problems, when I've just had a fight with my mom or dad, things like that. The only thing I do is I get into my room and I make myself think. I just try to let it pass. I used to be a happy person. So, I just try to let this thing pass. [She started to cry.] I think about my grandparents, my uncles, my friends [back in Mexico]. I haven't seen my uncles and grandparents for so long that I feel like I hardly know them. But I think about them and how they would suffer if this happened to me [if she hurt herself attempting suicide]. So, no, I can't let them down. They would suffer so much.

Memories of her family in Mexico fueled this adolescent's sense of family loyalty and prevented her from hurting herself. Yet, feelings of loss associated with separation from family in Mexico also contributed to adolescents' depression. This young girl's experience of shifting from being "a happy person" to being depressed provides a bridge to broaden our discussion of family separations to postimmigration family system stress.

Mexican Family System Changes After Immigration

Coming home to a cold house: The transformation into dual-earner households. Fathers played the role of family provider in Mexico, maintaining low-paying employment and shouldering financial responsibilities for the family. Mothers managed the home and took primary responsibility for raising children. Parents and adolescents described traditional gender roles reinforced by Mexican cultural norms, prompting mothers to be at home with their children spending time together and fathers to feel proud of their role as sole providers for their families.

After immigrating, Mexican families reconfigured themselves into dual-earner households. In 7 of 10 families, both parents worked. Financial stress and the higher U.S. cost of living prompted five of seven mothers to enter the labor force for the first time. This change helped family finances but was a difficult adjustment for family members. Mexican

men who were invested in traditional gender roles said they found it particularly distressing because it was now publicly displayed that the father, as head of the household, could not solely provide for his family. Women found jobs in factories, cafeterias, restaurants, or hotel housekeeping services. According to both parents and adolescents, the amount of time the family now had to spend together decreased dramatically. All families reported that this change took a toll on both the marital relationship and parent-child relationships. In addition, adolescents were commonly left with much more unsupervised time on their own. One father described his difficulty with the changes.

> Carmelo (father): In Mexico, I would come home with my little briefcase, and my kids would come greet me when I came home. They'd say, "Dad! Dad! What do you bring?" I have this or I have that. . .. Now, no, I come home to an empty and cold house. Empty and cold, because there's no one here. We only share our time together for a little while. We miss out on some conversation, something we may need to say to one another. In Mexico, I had my worries from work, but as soon as I go home, my bad mood would be gone. The aggravations from work would go away because people are waiting for you. My wife would tell me, "Look, I just made you your favorite dish," or simply, "I made you your cup of coffee how you like it." In the U.S., we both come home from work with the same bad mood.

How work kills the past: Parents' stress from demanding jobs. Dual-earner families described being overloaded and having little flexibility to absorb additional stressors. In the quotation below, one mother described the conflict she felt having to work, while she worried about her adolescent children and her ailing mother, who lived nearby. Her work demands did not allow her the time to support her family members in the ways she would have liked.

> Alicia (mother): I would like my daughter to talk to someone. She doesn't have papers, but she needs to talk to someone . . . like a psychologist. I'm not home to be with her. I had to work. The jobs here are tiring, very tiring. But

we must keep our eyes on our children, and get them ahead. My husband and I have three teenagers, and one married daughter. . ... We have to sacrifice so many things to get the family ahead. There are so many more worries about our children here. I just want to sit here and cry, but my children, they lift me.

Family stress seemed to be worsened by the nature of the parents' work, which was physically exhausting and emotionally stressful. This may be one reason that parents did not seem to mourn family separations with extended kin in Mexico as much as adolescents did. Exhausted parents had little time to reminisce. They focused on the multiple tasks of daily life, struggling to support both their families in Mexico and in the United States. One parent described what it was like to be consumed by work.

> Miguel (father): Work kills all your concentration on what used to be. By working, you don't realize anything but what is in front of you, the job ahead of you. I concentrate so much on myself and on my job. That's how I adapted. You learn about the ways here at your job.

In addition to the demanding physical labor, parents found that their work skills did not translate to work settings in America, requiring quick acquisition of new skills, often without the benefit of adequate communication with supervisors. The language barrier made this occupational adjustment particularly difficult. Four men described having to learn complicated skills, such as furniture assembly or using new machinery, after watching it done only once or twice. All fathers and four of the working mothers described being frustrated and unable to advance themselves at work because of their limited English language skills. This frustration was compounded by daily experiences of discrimination, such as being told to go back to Mexico. However, parents said they did not measure their success by their work. Work, and the stress inherent in their jobs, was a sacrifice made to provide for their families. Success for parents meant helping their children get ahead.

Eating alone: Family relationships and the decrease in shared family time. Parents' stress from work in dual-earner households influenced parent-adolescent relationships, family dynamics, and communication

processes. Seven parents worked 12-hr days, 6 days per week. Two adolescents had jobs at fast food restaurants to help their parents with finances. Family members said that these work schedules, along with both parents working, reduced the amount of time family members could spend with one another. Four parents said they would not see their adolescents for 1–3 days because of conflicting work and school schedules. There was markedly less shared family time in the United States than in Mexico. Parents often worked for hourly pay; more hours worked meant more financial gain for the family. A female adolescent commented on the impact of work on family life.

> Nohemi (female adolescent): My relationship with my parents has changed because, in Mexico, mom was always at home while we were at school. She would do the housework . . . ironing. When I came home from school, everything was ready, the food would be prepared, the clothes were washed and ironed and all that, you know? I would sit down with mom and dad to eat. And in the U.S., sometimes I don't see my dad for three days. Living in the same house, you know? For example, I go to school, then I go to work and sometimes, I get home late at night, and he's already sleeping when I come home. And the next day, it's the same thing. I don't get to see him until the third day. That's changed our relationship when you don't eat with each other every day.

Less time spent together meant adolescents had to handle problems on their own. This increase in the time they spent alone may have contributed to adolescents missing the close relationships they had in Mexico. Five female and two male adolescents described feeling isolated, lonely, and depressed in their homes. Feelings of sadness seemed to stem from grieving the loss of time spent with their parents and family in Mexico reflected in the words of a female adolescent:

> Reyna (female adolescent): I just stay in my room. I like to draw . . . . Sometimes, I'll sleep. There's no one in the house. I don't go out of my bedroom for anything except to brush my teeth and wash myself. My mother is

always working or going to church. My mother and sister are gone, so, here is where I pass the time. Alone. Always alone.

The amount of unsupervised time also allowed adolescents the opportunity to get into trouble. One immigrant father described the difficulties he had with his son who habitually skipped school after coming to the United States. On one occasion, the police escorted the adolescent home after he was found in an abandoned house partying with his Mexican gang associates. After a great deal of effort and structure from his father, this adolescent began to attend school regularly. The father commented:

> Victor (father): He's changed 100%. When he lived in Mexico, he did not go to school. I decided I had to go to Mexico and bring him here. He is relatively intelligent, and had to get out of that situation in Mexico . . . Since he's been here, he has been told that he has to go to school, and if he doesn't go to school, he will get me in trouble. And if he doesn't obey me, he will get both of us in trouble, in trouble with the law. His behavior can either protect us, or can get us into problems. Also, he doesn't have his mother near him since he left Mexico. That has been difficult for him. He's had to adapt to being more on his own in the house. When I come home from work, I have to pay more attention to where he's going, what he did that day, if the homework is done. It's difficult because I work all day, and then, this at home.

Both parents and adolescents seemed greatly affected by the loss of maternal supervision, decreased family time together, fatigue from physically demanding jobs, and relationship changes because of sequential immigration and the loss of extended kin in Mexico. These new family system stressors had different psychological impacts on parents and adolescents. One of the differences was the temporal orientation after immigration.

Temporal orientation after relocation. Although all family members understood the reasons for relocation, parents and adolescents had dramatically different temporal orientations in the postimmigration adjustment process. Parents focused on the future,

on getting their children educated, and anticipated the enhanced opportunities they perceived that their children would have with bilingual skills and a U.S. education. In contrast, adolescents focused on the past, mourning the loss of the lifestyle, family, and friends they left in Mexico. The following quote captures one adolescent's ambivalence.

> Juana (female adolescent): I feel sad because I had to leave a place that I loved very much for something that's better, better in that, if we were to go back [to Mexico], I'd have more opportunities because I'd know another language, and maybe we'd be able to get better jobs. But, I miss my family, my cousins [in Mexico].

If the metaphor for family relocation was indeed Diocelina's "plant growing toward the light," it seemed adolescents' thoughts centered on the roots under the soil that they could no longer see, whereas parents' dreamt of the future buds they hoped would bloom. These contrasting temporal orientations were one important way in which parents and adolescents went through different processes in their postimmigration adjustment to life in the United States. This provides a helpful bridge to shift our focus onto how parents and adolescents coped with these costs of getting ahead.

Coping With the Costs of Getting Ahead

Parental Strictness as a Means to Counter Americanization

Both parents and adolescents reported that parents tended to become stricter with their children after immigrating to the United States. This was both an important change in parent-adolescent dynamics and a strategy for coping with new family stressors. Parents had little time to spend with their children and were worried about dangers they perceived in the environment (e.g., drug use, pulling away from the family, having too much freedom). In this new context for parenting and without the network of support from extended family members, parents did not allow their adolescents many opportunities to explore their new environment. Parents also reported feeling vulnerable to the effects of their adolescents' behavior.

Families in the United States without legal papers were especially worried about being involved with the police, which may be one of the reasons parents restricted their adolescents' freedom outside the home. Participation in school-affiliated activities was uncommon. Parents and adolescents said that rules were stricter for daughters than sons, permitting daughters little latitude to recreate outside of the home. Sons generally had more freedom than daughters but were more frequently told to obey the law and keep out of legal trouble. A female adolescent commented on her understanding of the strict parenting:

> Eva (female adolescent): I think for us Latinos there are more restrictions at home because our parents do not exactly know how it is out there, and how other [American] people are . . .. They feel better if we stay home. Maybe because they do not want us to behave like [Americans] that we are [Mexicans] in other words that we don't become so liberal but rather that we remain like we were before we left Mexico. So we do not change our way of being. When you are too liberal many things can happen to you. One of them is using drugs, or having trouble with your studies. Those are things the parents fear that will happen here. They do not want that to happen, so they do not want you to go out.

Adolescents said that parental strictness caused the most parent-child conflict. Seven adolescents disagreed with the restrictions but acquiesced to their parents' decisions. It was difficult for adolescents to question their parents' decisions because these Mexican family systems strongly valued familism and respect for parents (respeto). This left the adolescents quietly simmering with conflict against parents who set the restrictive rules. Several parents reported that having their children question their decisions brought home to them the extent to which the adolescents were becoming "Americanized." One mother commented on her daughter's Americanized attitude:

> Zunilda (mother): Eva will say to me . . . "Well, why is that not good?" And I'll repeat, "Why is that not good?" At her age, I wouldn't

dare question my parents. I wouldn't even think of it. She's questioning her parent [facial expression widened with disbelief]. I say these kids are Americanized in those ways. But I will tell her "I don't have to answer that question because I am your mother. You don't ask me to explain 'why.' " I think that correction is needed because our customs are this way.

Cultural Assets and Family Strengths After Immigration

Familism: Connection makes me Mexican. Immediate family members relied on family cohesion, trust, and mutual support to cope with stressors in the new cultural system. The concept of familism refers to a strong sense of family orientation, obligation, loyalty, and cohesion (Parra-Cardona et al., 2006). One adolescent captured the concept of familism when he expressed his devotion to his family.

Juan (male adolescent): I think it's being close to my family. That's always a really big part of the Hispanic population, being close to the family, and the family being a priority all the time. My friends, they've always got time for school sports, being at school after school. For me, it's my family. And it's not strange. I have people say, "Why do you want to go to a party where your family's at? Don't you want to get away from them?" You know, I don't really get tired of them. I've always been really close to them. That connection to my parents, that trust that you can talk to them, that makes me Mexican.

Familism was an important cultural asset for the Mexican adolescents. Adolescents said they recreated and relaxed physically and emotionally with family members unlike with anyone else. There was a pervasive sense that the families supported the adolescents, especially during difficult times. At the same time, there were important obligations to be met. Parents said they expected respect and obedience from their children. There was a clear hierarchical structure in which parents were responsible for making decisions that adolescents were required to obey. There was a shared sense of success and failure. Parents believed their success and accomplishments

were for their children. Conversely, parents would feel like they had failed if their children did not succeed. At the same time, adolescents said that their own failure becomes their parents' failure.

Both parents and adolescents said that familism provided initiative for at least some family members to become bilingual and bicultural in order to help other family members interact with the host culture. Adolescents were proud that they could help their parents navigate the new cultural system. Parents were proud of their adolescents' new cultural skills, seeing these skills as a sign their children were getting ahead. However, parents worried about how their adolescent's biculturalism would affect the family in the future. Parents were highly invested in keeping their family together and worried that the family might end up living in two different countries. One mother remarked:

Adriana (mother): Now, if the children want to stay here, and the parents have finished educating their children and want to return to their land, that is difficult because the family doesn't stay together after all this . . .. we come here to grab . . . economic security for our children, and then the family separates in two countries? . . . That is worrisome. And it happens at the end, when the obstacles have been overcome.

All of the parents and adolescents described familism as a core value in Mexican family life both before and after immigration. However, during the postimmigration period, familism became complex and reflected a dialectic. On the one hand, familism appeared to be strengthened after immigration because adolescents were worried about their parents' vulnerability in the new cultural system and strived to acquire new cultural skills to help their families. At the same time, family ties were more difficult to maintain because of new family circumstances with both parents working multiple jobs, distance from family left in Mexico, and uncertainty over where adolescents would live after they adjusted to life in the United States. Familism was at the heart of this ongoing dialectical tension described by both parents and adolescents.

Cultural traditions and rituals. Mexican cultural traditions and rituals were important to both parents and adolescents because they intensified the families'

collective pride and identity. Adolescents said that they felt Mexican because of the traditions that they practiced. Parents said that they would never let go of their traditions and rituals that helped to build family identity and unity. Traditions and rituals centered on religious holidays. Some holidays, like Christmas, were the same religious holidays practiced in the United States, but they were celebrated differently in Mexico. There were also Mexican holidays, such as *Dia de los Muertos* [Day of the Dead] to honor deceased ancestors, and *Posadas*, which were typically not celebrated in the United States. Families tried to replicate their Mexican traditions in their homes and sometimes in their churches. The holidays did not feel quite the same without their family members who remained in Mexico. One mother shared her insights about the importance of family traditions:

> Graciela (mother): Customs and traditions have changed, yes, in the sense that I don't have my whole family here. We do celebrate Christmas, but it is not the same. Still, I wouldn't let go of my Mexican traditions. Now I must think of my family as my husband and my children. When there is a celebration where traditional foods are made, we really enjoy ourselves. There is much happiness. The traditions that I've brought from Mexico, how we celebrate holidays is very different. There is no Christmas here like there was in my town. We would begin Christmas festivities the 16th of December and continue them until January.

Maintaining cultural rituals and traditions was one way that families described staying close to their Mexican culture. Adolescents said that practicing these traditions and rituals helped them preserve their Mexican cultural identities, their history, sense of familism, and ethnic pride even as they experienced stress and pressure to assimilate from social systems outside of their homes. At the same time, the postimmigration adjustment process prompted families to adopt new traditions and rituals. Adopting and adapting U.S. cultural traditions and rituals helped the Mexican families take part in the host culture. One adolescent explained how learning celebrations and traditions was a key aspect of feeling one is a part of the host culture and was a sign of growing bicultural competencies.

> Eva (female adolescent): I like to learn about the things that the [U.S.] culture likes to celebrate, its traditions. Halloween, St. Patrick's Day, Mother's Day, all of those. These holidays are different and that is why you learn and feel a part of them, even if you are not too much a part, but you feel a part of this culture. You learn your culture and you learn other cultures, and you mix the cultures, and you can make something new out of one and the other, or you can pick the way that you like how things are done.

A mother from a different family expressed the same sentiment, explaining how her family adapts new cultural customs to participate in the host culture.

> Adriana (mother): My daughter is learning a little more English, and we can start grabbing some of their [American] customs. Like here, the first year we heard, "No work tomorrow. It's Thanksgiving." And we say among ourselves, "What's Thanksgiving?" Then the second year, we started knowing a little more of what Thanksgiving is. Little by little, we learn the customs. We know that we give thanks to God on Thanksgiving. We said, "We can do that here at home." We start grabbing a little of their customs because we live here. I think we must learn their [American] customs, and celebrate what we can of them.

Adolescents as cultural brokers. Parent-adolescent cultural differences (e.g., acculturation gaps) did not just contribute to conflicts in some of the families. All of the parents said they welcomed some aspects of acculturation in their adolescents because this helped the family meet daily needs. Adolescents paid bills, provided translation for their parents, and advised their younger siblings when their parents did not. Adolescents' growing knowledge of English placed them in a highly valued position in the family. One male adolescent commented on his new family role:

> Manuel (male adolescent): My parents didn't really have to adapt because of us [pointed to himself]. We are there as their mediator between the two cultures, and when they need

some-thing, they'll say, "Can you help us out?" We don't tell them that we need this or that. We go to the bank, the doctor, the store. We [children] help them. Like at the bank, they'll say, "Say this for us." They didn't need to adapt too much. They live their way here, and when they want something from the outside, they come to us, and that's just how it is. We help them out.

Adolescents said that along with this new power came the responsibility inherent in using new cultural knowledge and language skills to assist parents. Nearly all of the adolescents said they worried about their parents being vulnerable in the new cultural system. The majority of these adolescents used this new role as cultural brokers to take a step toward maturity.

Discussion

This study sought to explore three major questions: (a) how do undocumented Mexican families change after immigration, (b) how do these changes affect family members and their interactions, and (c) what factors explain postimmigration family system adjustment in undocumented families? A conceptual model explaining undocumented Mexican family adjustment was created using GTM. Past research on Latino immigrant families contends that acculturation gaps precipitate parent-adolescent relationship stress and that familism decreases with time spent in the United States (Coatsworth et al., 2002; Cortes, 1995; Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1980). If these dynamics were indeed occurring, we wanted to illuminate why they were taking place and what underlying processes were fueling these changes in parent-adolescent relationships and the family system as a whole using the conceptual model that emerged from the data.

The conceptual model shown in Figure 1 delineated three major domains related to postimmigration adjustment of Mexican families—the context of getting ahead, the costs of getting ahead, and coping with the costs of getting ahead. In the "context for getting ahead," all of the participating parents and adolescents said they had relocated to the United States for work opportunities and to get their children ahead by providing them with English language skills and a U.S. education. Families in this study also described a number of costs or challenges associated with getting ahead. Adolescents and mothers said that family relationships, especially relationships with fathers, were often strained and roles needed to be redefined because of lengthy separations during sequential immigration. After immigration, parents lamented having less time to spend with their children because of demanding new jobs and mothers entering the work force. Parents endured these new challenges by focusing on the future and on how their children would get ahead. In contrast, adolescents reported that decreased family time together, coupled with the loss of relationships with family members left in Mexico, left them focused on the past, feeling lonely, and mourning the losses they had experienced. The costs of getting ahead influenced Mexican family system adjustment.

Families compensated by developing strategies to cope with the costs of getting ahead. After immigration, a complex dialectic surfaced around familism. All parents and adolescents said familism continued to be of utmost importance and was even reinforced after immigration because of the new challenges to family unity. Adolescents expressed worries about their parents' vulnerability in the new cultural system, whereas parents made major sacrifices to get their children ahead. Although parents and adolescents were highly invested in familism, maintaining strong family cohesion seemed increasingly difficult while facing the challenging costs of getting ahead.

Our conceptual model helps to explain why past researchers have found familism to erode over time spent in the United States (Cortes, 1995; Rogler & Cooney, 1984) and posits new theoretical propositions for future research. Geographic separations cut family members off from the extensive network of family relationships they enjoyed in Mexico. Parents reported reluctantly having to redefine their notion of the family to emphasize relationships with immediate, nuclear members. Parents coped by focusing on the future of their children. Adolescents spent time mourning their losses but had to adjust to the new living circumstances. Their new lives in the United States consisted of nuclear family members juggling multiple jobs with far less external social support and little time to devote to one another. Despite dynamics that made it particularly difficult to maintain high levels of familism, parents and adolescents continued to stress the importance of this cultural value in their new environment. Our model suggests that family system changes (e.g., family separations, becoming

a dual-earner household, spending less time together) are more strongly connected to postimmigration changes in familism than adoption of American cultural norms. Future research should examine this new proposition as an alternative to traditional assimilation hypotheses (Hirschman, 1994).

Our conceptual model also proposes that parent-adolescent acculturation gaps are more complex than previously hypothesized. Hernandez and McGoldrick (1999) reported that parent-adolescent conflicts arose from parents' insistence on maintaining culture of origin traditions in the face of their children's acculturation to the host culture—that is, from the acculturation gap (see also Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1980; Szapocznik et al., 1986). Coatsworth et al. (2002, p. 118) also asserted that parent-adolescent conflict because of acculturation gaps contributed to Latino parents having low investment in their children. In contrast, we found parent-adolescent acculturation gaps to be less problematic and no evidence to link these gaps with low parental investment. All of the parents and adolescents in this study said they wanted to maintain their Mexican traditions and reported little conflict directly because of acculturation. Instead, conflicts revolved around parents' fears of the dangers they perceived in the U.S. environment. In these families, conflicts arose when adolescents requested—and were consistently denied—permission to recreate with their Latino friends outside the home. From the adolescents' perspective, these conflicts with parents were complex because they wanted to recreate in the U.S. environment with Latino friends who shared similar cultural ways. Adolescents were not necessarily rapidly adopting U.S. cultural behaviors. Nine of 10 of the adolescents maintained high levels of involvement with their Mexican cultural norms, values, and traditions. This dynamic makes the acculturation gap between parents and adolescents more complex than if adolescents were eagerly assimilating. We propose that postimmigration parent-adolescent conflict is due more to increasingly restrictive parenting styles adopted in response to perceived dangers in the families' new environments than to acculturation gaps caused by the rapid assimilation of children.

Although the literature on parent-adolescent acculturation gaps has focused on how these gaps precipitate family stress, we found that acculturation gaps may also serve an adaptive purpose. In our interviews, all of the parents wanted their adolescents to become bicultural. Adolescents who learned English were called upon to help other family members

navigate the host culture, creating a valuable new role in the family. Theoretically, we posit that adolescent development of new bicultural skills in the host culture (e.g., becoming cultural brokers) is encouraged by the family as one way to foster family system adjustment and cope with the costs of getting ahead. Future research should examine the relative contributions of these competing explanations, examining how acculturation gaps are connected to both stress and adaptation in Mexican immigrant families.

Limitations

We relied on interview data from multiple family members for this study. Family interactions were chronicled in field notes before, during, and after the interviews. Using constant comparison methods, we took great care to triangulate the data from multiple informants. Even so, there are alternative qualitative methods, such as conducting family observations, which would have yielded helpful data. Including multiple data types, such as journals and school records, would further have strengthened this study's design and should be included in future studies.

Implications for Clinical Practice and Policy for Mexican Families

Our findings support the need for the development of prevention and intervention programs for Mexican immigrant families. These programs should work to decrease acculturation stress, help families cope with postimmigration changes (e.g., becoming dual-earner households, maximizing the little time spent together), and promote cultural assets such as familism and ethnic traditions. Programs for Latino immigrant families have been developed and show promising results (see Bacallao & Smokowski, 2005, for a review; see also Coatsworth et al., 2002; Szapocznik et al., 1986) but require dissemination and further testing. Two programs in particular, Familias Unidas developed by Szapocznik et al. (Coatsworth et al.) and Entre Dos Mundos developed by Bacallao and Smokowski, adopt a family focus to address parent-adolescent cultural conflicts and enhance coping skills for handling acculturation stressors. Clinicians facilitating these programs should pay special attention to the accumulation of losses and the grieving process family members experience in being separated

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from family in Mexico. Clinicians should help family members address relationship issues that develop during sequential immigration and aid in creating adaptive new roles to meet postimmigration challenges.

Finally, social policymakers should consider initiatives, like guest worker programs, that would decrease acculturation stress by allowing undocumented families to come out of hiding. Many proposals for reforming immigration policies focus on border enforcement, making safe travel back and forth from Mexico increasingly difficult and dangerous. Our findings suggest that this approach increases the stress of family separations, contributing to difficulties in the postimmigration period.

Conclusions

This study delineated the ways in which the costs of getting ahead influenced the postimmigration adjustment in undocumented Mexican families who immigrated to North Carolina. Parents chose to relocate to the United States for their families' economic security and to get their children ahead with bilingual skills and a U.S. education. Immigration was a difficult and protracted event that disturbed the family's homeostasis, often requiring profound changes in the Mexican family system to reestablish equilibrium. After immigration, these families mourned the loss of family connections and familial support both in Mexico and in the United States. Families also had to adjust to becoming dual-earner households, juggling multiple jobs and stressful work conditions, which left little time for family relationships. Parents became more authoritarian in order to shield their adolescents from perceived dangers in the U.S. environment. Without extended family support that protected children in Mexico, parents were reluctant to let their adolescents recreate in the new U.S. environment with Latino friends, and this generated conflict in parent-adolescent relationships.

The families' sense of familism and maintenance of cultural traditions helped buffer families coping with the costs of getting ahead. Although familism became more difficult to maintain after immigration, this cultural value provided families with a sense of mutual obligation that delineated roles and responsibilities in meeting the challenges in their new living situations. Cultural traditions and rituals also helped families preserve their ethnic pride and develop bicultural competencies.

Because the number of undocumented immigrants continues to rise, we need to learn more about how undocumented families function. Having a deeper understanding of undocumented family processes will guide efforts to help individuals and families like these who are trying to "get ahead" and will aid in fashioning programs and policies for reducing the costs of getting ahead.

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