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Central American and Mexican Mothers and Youth Migration-Related Separations and Reunifications

Permalink

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Journal

Journal of Loss and Trauma, 30(8)

ISSN

1532-5024

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Publication Date

2025-11-17

DOI

10.1080/15325024.2025.2492728

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Peer reviewed

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Central American and Mexican mothers and youth migration-related separations and reunifications

Abstract

In pursuit of safety and better economic opportunities, some parents make the difficult decision to migrate to the United States, leaving their children behind in the care of a substitute caregiver. Since 2021, more than 400,000 unaccompanied immigrant youth have migrated to the United States to reunify with their parents. These reunifications are often precarious; attachment disruptions resulting from prolonged separation affect the psychological well-being of youth and parents. We collected and analyzed interviews from 16 mother–youth dyads from Mexico and Central America who experienced migration-related separations. Drawing on frameworks of attachment, ambiguous loss, and migratory grief, we used grounded theory methods, specifically Schatzman’s dimensional analysis, to uncover meanings, interactions, and outcomes that migrant youth experience during and after separation from their mother. Analyses revealed five key findings: (a) Family separation is not a discrete event; it occurs in the context of multiple separations related to migration, divorce, community violence, and death; (b) families experience ongoing stress and trauma after reunification; (c) youth and mothers’ experiences of ambiguous loss and migratory grief are often disenfranchised both in and outside the family system; (d) ambiguous loss and migratory grief can exacerbate attachment ruptures, affecting the quality of the mother–youth relationship; and (e) despite unanticipated ruptures in attachment, mothers strive to repair their relationship with their children and attune to their needs during reunification. Addressing attachment disruption, ambiguous loss, and migratory grief can strengthen families, build resilience, and buffer the consequences of migration-related trauma.

Keywords: family separation, family reunification, attachment, ambiguous loss, disenfranchised grief

Introduction

In pursuit of better economic opportunities and fleeing violence, many Central American and Mexican parents are forced to make the difficult decision to engage in serial migration to the United States, often migrating first and leaving their children behind in the care of a substitute caregiver(s). Migration-related separations affect nearly 21% of children in Latin America and the Caribbean (Marcus et al., 2023). Although migration brings the prospect of a better life and hope for the future, it is also a major transition that can cause tremendous psychological distress (Barajas-Gonzalez et al., 2021).

Parents and children often experience psychological, relational, and social losses, in addition to the loss of language, cultural attitudes and values, and familiar surroundings (Casado et al., 2010; Falicov, 2017). Psychological, interpersonal, and somatic reactions evoked by these losses are referred to as *migratory grief* (Cedeño, 2021; Falicov, 2002). Although grief and loss are normative and common human experiences, the grief process (i.e., reactions to loss) can be complicated by previous and ongoing trauma, disruptions in parent–child attachment, challenges in parent–child reunification, and experiences of grief that are not socially recognized or acceptable (i.e., *disenfranchised grief*; Casado et al., 2010; Doka, 1989).

Migratory grief is multifaceted; it can result in immediate and recurrent losses, many of which can be characterized as *ambiguous losses*. Migratory losses are ambiguous because the object of loss may not be psychologically or physically present, but its absence is not as permanent and defined as in death (Cedeño, 2021). The uncertainty of reunification, especially for children, is particularly difficult to manage over time and can lead to attachment ruptures between children and their caregivers (Venta et al., 2020). Factors that may augment attachment ruptures and migratory grief and affect the subsequent experience of reunification include the

quality of caregiving by substitute caregivers, length of separation, age of the child at the time of separation, and the quality and frequency of communication between the migrating parent and child (Barros Lane et al., 2022; Jerves et al., 2020).

Drawing from theories of attachment (Bowlby, 1982), ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999), and migratory grief (Falicov, 2002; Jerves et al., 2020), we conducted semistructured interviews with 16 mother–youth dyads from Central America and Mexico who experienced short- and long-term migration-related separations and were reunified in a large urban city in the United States. We applied Schatzman’s (1991) dimensional analysis to uncover the meanings, interactions, and outcomes that migrant youth experienced during separation from and after reunification with their mother. We further explored the experiences that influence the family reunification process and youths’ overall well-being as they navigated adjustment in families, schools, and communities in the United States. This study extended prior research by capturing the perspectives of both mothers and their children. Allowing for both perspectives highlighted areas of convergence and divergence and can help families reconnect following reunification.

Literature Review

Childhood Attachment and Family Separation

People are motivated to seek proximity and closeness (Bowlby, 1982). During infancy and early childhood, children are soothed by the emotional and physical proximity of their caregiver, such that they exhibit fear and distress when exposed to strangers or separated from the object of their attachment (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2008). Attunement, or the ability of a parent to respond to their child’s needs (Child Development Institute, 2024), is a critical component of attachment. Children who receive consistent and sensitive responses from caregivers typically exhibit secure attachment, interpreting the world as a safe place they can explore with curiosity

and believing themselves to be intrinsically worthy of care. In contrast, children who experience their caregivers as insensitive, inappropriate, or unresponsive to their needs (i.e., misattunement) may view others as untrustworthy, dangerous, or unpredictable and consider themselves undeserving of love (Bowlby, 1973). As a result, proximity-seeking strategies later in life may be characterized by avoidant or anxious attachment styles (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2008), affecting relationships and family structures.

Even for securely attached children, subsequent separation from an attachment figure can trigger intense behavioral and emotional responses, including feelings of abandonment and extreme distress, even if the child is left with a proxy attachment figure (Barros Lane et al., 2022; Lu et al., 2020). Although children may have multiple attachment figures, especially in the Latin American context, some research had suggested an inherent attachment hierarchy wherein the primary attachment figure is not interchangeable with other caregivers, who cannot compensate for the loss of the primary figure (Lu et al., 2020). In prior research with immigrant youth from Mexico and Central America, separation from mothers, but not fathers, was associated with reduced attachment security (Arnold, 2006; Venta et al., 2020).

The consequences of parental separation on the attachment relationship and children's psychological well-being are often influenced by which parent migrates (e.g., mother or father; Graham & Jordan, 2011; Lu et al., 2020), the quality of the alternative caregiver during separation (Dreby, 2007), the stability of the caregiver (Mazzucato et al., 2015), hardship that the child endures during separation, and the length of the separation (Castañeda & Buck, 2011; Lu et al., 2020). Youths' experiences with substitute caregivers often vary, with some caregivers providing nurturance and stability. Other children transition among multiple caregivers or have caregivers who are abusive, neglectful, or financially motivated (Barros Lane et al., 2022).

Alternative caregivers may provide some structure, supervision, and nurturing, but they may not have the same childrearing standards or practices as biological parents (Smeekens et al., 2012). These caregivers often bear added childcare, household, and financial responsibilities and the psychological burden of caring for a child amid parental separation. This increased stress may contribute to lower warmth and nurturing and a more punitive and harsh parenting style (Lu et al., 2020), which can exacerbate attachment-related distress in children.

Family Reunification and Reorganization

Serial migration, in which parents migrate first and children follow later, can disrupt parenting and family structures and reorganization (Berger Cardoso et al., 2018). Disruptions are characterized by reduced supervision, decreased involvement in cognitive stimulation and learning, and a breakdown in parental authority and social control (Lu et al., 2020). Some families adjust to the absence of parents by assuming different roles; caregivers may have increased financial and emotional responsibilities for children and older youth may have greater caregiver responsibilities for younger children (Berger Cardoso et al., 2018).

Upon reunification, parents are tasked with reestablishing the parenting role and practices. Interruptions in parent–child attachment, in addition to heightened distress related to migration and acculturation, can complicate these efforts (Lu et al., 2020). Children who formed attachment bonds with their alternative caregiver incur another attachment loss when leaving them to reunify with their parents (Falicov, 2017). This postreunification strain is often evident when culturally ingrained developmental expectations—e.g., children’s obedience toward parents (*respeto*), dedication to family (*familism*), and trust in parents (*confianza*)—clash with situations in which children have assumed adult responsibilities and been raised by other caregivers (Falicov, 2017).

As a result of these stressors, children may not feel emotionally bonded to their parents; reunification in this context can lead to tensions, conflicts, and disorientation regarding their new role in the family (Barros Lane et al., 2022). These challenges can be exacerbated by new family constellations like siblings and stepparents and specific situations, such as when parents try to reassume the authority role and discipline children (Barros Lane et al., 2022). Children's anger, confusion, grief, and emotional distance may be invalidated or misunderstood by parents who sacrificed greatly to reunite with their children and whose initial migration was done in their children's best interest (e.g., sending remittances to economically support them; Barros Lane et al., 2022). A perception of youths' lack of respect and gratitude may fuel ongoing tensions, conflict, disorientation, and disconnection (Barros Lane et al., 2022; Lu et al., 2020).

Grief and Loss among Immigrant Families

Migration entails multiple types of loss: physical (home, schools and other institutions), social (people, community), cultural (language, food), and psychological (lack of belonging, hope for a better life). Migratory grief is the result of psychological, interpersonal and somatic reactions to these losses (Cedeño, 2021; Falicov, 2002). Migratory grief is also related to the nature of the loss as ambiguous, meaning partial, incomplete, or unclear loss (Boss, 1999; Cedeño, 2021; Falicov, 2002; Jerves et al., 2020). Ambiguous loss can occur when family members are physically absent but psychologically present (e.g., noncustodial parent in divorce, parent who migrated to another country). It can also occur when someone is physically present but emotionally and psychologically absent (e.g., family member with Alzheimer's disease, parent or spouse who is emotionally unavailable). Migration can involve a crossover of both forms. For example, a family member may not be physically present but engage in family events

virtually; by contrast, a mother working several jobs and acclimating to her new environment may be physically present but less emotionally available to children (Falicov, 2014).

Some youth migrate with a tremendous sense of hope for the future, especially when reunifying with parents. However this hope and excitement can co-occur with feelings of anxiety and depression, which are related to attachment disruptions and migratory grief that is often disenfranchised. Disenfranchised grief occurs when an individual endures a substantial loss that is not openly recognized, socially validated, or publicly mourned, as in the case of migration (Casado et al., 2010). Immigrants are societally expected to adjust to the host community, often without openly acknowledging migration-related loss and grief. Migrants from Mexico and Central America are often perceived as voluntary migrants even though most are escaping extreme poverty and violence in their home country. This misconception fuels judgment for having “chosen” to leave family members behind (Sanchez et al., 2021). From this perspective, migratory grief is a type of disenfranchised grief (Casado et al., 2010; Sanchez et al., 2021).

At the individual level, disenfranchisement can be internalized and self-inflicted (Doka, 2008), such as when parents feel shame and guilt over migrating without their children and defensively minimize or disconnect from feelings of loss. When youth reunite with parents, they may mourn the alternate caregivers left behind and experience deep sadness, loneliness, and anger (Barros Lane et al., 2022). This grief is often unrecognized by their communities and parents, who feel the weight of their sacrifices and want recognition for all they have done to bring the family together. The lack of attunement and shared empathy between immigrant youth and their parents may cause greater stress and disconnection during the reunification phase.

Current Study

In this study, we relied on grounded theory methods to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of immigrant youth and mothers who have reunified following migration-related separation. Grounded theory focuses on understanding how participants construct meaning from their experiences (Charmaz, 2000). We explored with youth and mothers their strengths and challenges related to the parent–child relationship during reunification. This research expanded the current literature by taking a dyadic (i.e., mother–youth) approach to understanding the phenomenon of migration-related separations and reunification through theories of attachment, ambiguous loss, and migratory grief.

Method

Procedure

We conducted semistructured, individual interviews with 16 mother–youth dyads from a large city in Southern region of the United States. Youth and mother dyads were eligible to participate if youth were 10–18 years old, they had migrated to the United States from a Spanish-speaking country in Latin America (except Puerto Rico), experienced migration-related separation, and spoke English or Spanish. We restricted the sample to youth who had experienced separation and reunification with their mother, although those who also experienced separation from their father or other caregivers were not excluded. We focused on mothers because prior research has documented greater distress in this scenario (Lu et al., 2020; Venta et al., 2020).

Semistructured interviews were conducted in Spanish or English based on participant preference at community agencies in a large city in the Southern region of the United States. Interviews were focused on experiences with separation and reunification (for more details on the semistructured interview guide, see Berger Cardoso et al., 2022). The interviews were audio

recorded and conducted concurrently by bilingual researchers in separate interview spaces. In accordance with protocols approved by the Institutional Review Board (University of Houston, Study 00001724) all risks to participants were monitored by research investigators.

Sample

Youth were between 10 and 18 years old at the time of the interviews ($M = 13.5$, $SD = 2.48$). Slightly more than half of the youth identified as female ($n = 9$, 56.2%) and their average age of the youth at the time of the mother's migration was 8 years ($SD = 3.79$, range = 2–13). The average age of mothers in the sample was 35.5 years ($SD = 6.62$). Youth and mothers were originally from Honduras ($n = 7$), El Salvador ($n = 4$), Mexico ($n = 3$), and Guatemala ($n = 2$). The length of mother–youth separation ranged from less than 1 year to 10 years, with an average length of around 5 years. See Table 1 for a complete description of the sample. See Table 2 for separation descriptives by dyad.

[Insert Table 1 and Table 2]

Data Analysis

We applied Schatzman's (1991) dimensional analysis to uncover meanings, interactions, and outcomes of immigrant youth separated from their mother by migration. The analysis consisted of three phases: identification, integration, and construction of an explanatory matrix to better understand youths' and mothers' experiences (Kools et al., 1996; Schatzman, 1991). Data analysis was conducted with transcripts in Spanish and then translated for publication.

In the identification phase, we collaboratively deconstructed the five core dimensions of dimensional analysis (Kools et al., 1996; Schatzman, 1991)—perspective, context, conditions, processes, and consequences—via line-by-line coding. We identified 27 subcodes that depicted

how immigrant youth experienced migration-related separation from a dyadic perspective (see Table 3).

[Insert Table 3]

In the integration phase, we used comparison and conceptual debriefing to identify patterns and relations among the dimensions and subcategories (Kools et al., 1996). Eight core categories were identified as salient in youths' and mothers' experiences with separation and reunification. The core categories embedded in each dimension were compared across mother–youth dyads to gain a deeper understanding of the components involved in migration-related family separation and their interrelations (see Table 4).

[Insert Table 4]

The final phase of dimensional analysis involves construction of an explanatory matrix to describe the phenomena being studied (Kools et al., 1996; Schatzman, 1991). We arranged and rearranged dimensions to identify and explain patterns and relations between dimensions and their core categories (Kools et al., 1996; Schatzmann, 1991). We integrated and reconfigured the core categories to create the explanatory matrix, which described how youth in the study experienced migration-related separation from their mother (see Figure 1). Throughout the analysis, all coders engaged in reflexivity and conceptual memoing to detail insights and explore their unique relation and positionality to the data (see Table 5).

[Insert Table 5]

Results

The explanatory matrix developed to describe how youth experience separation from their mother was dynamic, nonlinear, and grounded in interactions among contexts, conditions, and processes (see Figure 1). That is, youth outcomes were driven by the dynamic interactions of

contexts that caused separation, conditions to which they were exposed during and after separations (e.g., stress, trauma, quality of relationships with and among caregivers), and processes by which the youth and their caregivers responded to separations (e.g., ambiguous loss, grief), resulting in consequences related to parent–child reunification (e.g., attachment quality).

[Insert Figure 1]

Context

The central organizing dimension of this analysis was separations described by immigrant youth and their mothers. Several contexts resulted in separation of these youth from their caregivers, including violence (both interpersonal and community) and extreme poverty:

In Honduras, the gang members wanted to kill my family. And if I didn't join the gang, they were going to kill my whole family, and I didn't want to join. When they did that to me, that's when I decided to come [to the United States]. At the time, my mom found out and she was outside of the country, in Guatemala. When she found out, she started to send money so I could cross over here. (9B, 13 years old, Honduras)

“[We migrated] because they killed my older sister in Mexico and my mom was scared to stay there and decided to bring us here” (8B, 15 years old, Mexico). In addition to community violence, interpersonal violence and difficult family dynamics prompted migration by mothers, who often expressed concern for their safety and well-being, particularly in the context of a limited social safety net and corrupt and inept law enforcement.

He would criticize me. Hit me. Everything. Insults. My God, he busted my skull. I still have a scar on my head. Even still, you can report but they don't do anything. They don't

do anything—the law there, for the poor. They will do the paperwork, but it will stay there. Filed, it stays. (3A, 41 years old, Honduras)

Finally, immigration policies and procedures contributed to families having to separate to improve their chances of entering the country. “[We were separated] for a bit, like three or four years. My dad took [my mom] with my brother, and they came to the U.S. because their papers were ready, so they came” (4B, 13 years old, Honduras). Families that wanted to migrate together could not do so because of U.S. immigration policies.

Perspective

In dimensional analysis, perspective represents the primary storyline and main organizing feature. In this study, we focused on instances of separation as described by youth and their mothers as the central organizing dimension. Mothers and youth described separation not as a discrete event but rather a series of disruptions that often spanned multiple developmental periods and involved multiple caregivers. First, some youth experienced separation from internal migration, then migration to the United States, as a 12-year-old girl from Honduras described:

It hurt me bad because I remember that [my mom] sent me with my grandma in her little hometown. Even though we couldn’t go with her, she would come to visit once a year or so when she could get off work. I was still able to hear her voice when she made video calls with my sister. When she left [for the United States], I would get sad because even though we couldn’t see each other, I wanted to hear her voice, and I couldn’t even do that. (15B, Honduras, 12 years old)

Additionally, mothers described children experiencing multiple separations due to leaving their alternative caregivers, death, extreme trauma in the family system, and U.S. immigration policies:

My son lived with my parents while we were separated, and he migrated with my mom [to reunify with me]. When they arrived, migration [officials] told them that because both [my son's] parents were in the U.S., they could not leave him with his grandmother, so they sent him to the shelter and left [my mom] in migration [and deported her]. It's been really hard for [my son] still because he says that he will never forget that they separated him from his grandma. They asked not to be separated, but they had to separate them.
(9A, Honduras, 27 years old)

We constructed timelines depicting the chronology and extent of separations, reunifications, losses, and trauma experienced by each immigrant youth in this study (see Table 6). We engaged in analytic memoing to document youth's experiences with separation from caregivers (e.g., mom, dad, siblings, alternative caregivers), significant trauma (e.g., abuse, severe neglect), loss (e.g., death of a close family member), and reunification with family from youths' and mothers' perspectives. These timelines illustrate the frequency of separations. Separations and losses occurred on a continuum, and many were ongoing and spanned multiple developmental periods.¹ The impact of migration-related separations occurred against the

¹ For example, 9B is a 13-year-old boy from Honduras who experienced separation from his father due to interpersonal violence against his mother and his father's involvement in community violence when 9B was 2 years old. At age 5, his mother left him in the care of his great-grandmother in Honduras while she migrated to the United States to reunify with her mother, who had migrated when she was a child. 9B began to be recruited by local gangs at age 10 and as a result, he migrated to the United States with his great-grandmother at age 11. He was separated from his great-grandmother upon arriving at the U.S. border and placed in an Office of Refugee Resettlement facility

backdrop of many other separations described by youth and mothers, both before and after maternal migration.

[Insert Table 6]

Conditions

Conditions are the circumstances that influence the processes and resulting consequences (Kool et al., 1996; Schatzman, 1991). Two overarching conditions influenced how separation and reunification were experienced by youth and their mothers: (a) stress and trauma and (b) quality of relationships with and among caregivers.

Stress and Trauma

Sources of stress and trauma for participants included generational separations, community violence, and immigration policies. Although all youth in this study had been separated from their mother and other caregivers, many mothers had also experienced separation from their mother and primary caregivers in their childhood. These generational separations occurred in the context of colonialism, imperialism, and political corruption.

My mom also had to leave because we're seven siblings and my mom also had to be our mother and father. It's basically the same story as me. I had to leave my kids with [my grandma], too. But we're always attentive to our kids, so I knew the best person for them to stay with would be my grandma, who raised me. (9A, 27 years old, Honduras)

for unaccompanied immigrant children, while his great-grandmother was deported to Honduras. He was reunified with his mother at age 12. At age 13 (his age at the interview), 9B discussed experiencing loss as the result of his uncle's recent death in Honduras. He also discussed feeling significant grief over prolonged separation from his older brother, who remained in their home country, awaiting resources to migrate.

Community and political violence were common experiences among youth. “Some people wanted to hurt us or to do something because there was a man that would ask for money every time we went out, and if my grandma didn’t give him money, he was going to hurt me” (7B, 10 years old, El Salvador). Another youth described the impact of political violence on the family unit:

They wanted us dead because we were going to tell the police, and they didn’t want no witnesses. We were going to tell. We were going to report them, because it was the mayor. Because my grandma was in politics. So, the mayor saw that [my grandma’s] campaign was winning, and he paid \$1,000 for someone to kill her, and what was sad was that my mom always said, “Was \$1,000 really worth my mother’s life?” (11B, 11 years old, El Salvador)

Participants described catalyzing events that influenced the extent, length, and ambiguity of separation, such as immigration paperwork not coming through as expected or lacking sufficient money or employment to migrate as a family unit. Youth continuously worried about their family members, particularly their former caregivers, in their home countries, citing their separation as a primary stressor. Furthermore, some youth experienced family dissolution due to immigration detention and deportation practices, which affected their well-being and led to additional separation from attachment figures on the U.S. side of the border. “They deported my dad, but he wasn’t doing anything, they just deported him, just like that. They were some bad police, because we wanted to give him a goodbye hug but they wouldn’t let us” (5B, 10 years old, Honduras). Other youth described how their parents were deported as a result of trying to get them released from the Office of Refugee Resettlement custody.

It's that when I came here, immigration got my dad and tricked him into signing some paperwork so that I could be released. But my dad doesn't know how to read, so he just signed, and then they sent him to jail and deported him to Mexico. (8B, 15 years old, Mexico)

Quality of Relationships with and among Caregivers

In our sample, 56% ($n = 9$) of youth were left in the care of a grandmother or another close and trusted relative, whereas 44% ($n = 7$) were left in more precarious care situations, like with neighbors or friends. In some cases, because of the length of separation, youths' original caregivers died, leaving them in the care of more distant relatives. The quality of the relationships between youth and their caregivers in the country of origin and between their mother and their caregivers affected their reunification outcomes.

I confided a lot in my brother and in my aunt, one of my aunts. She always went to school for me anytime a mom would have gone. It got to the point that they would ask me who my mom was, and I would tell them it was her. (14B, 18 years old, El Salvador)

However, not all youth had positive attachments with their alternative caregivers. Some described difficult and abusive relationships with those in charge of their care, which contributed to confusion and attachment trauma that affected their reunification with their mother:

For the first 7 months [our step-grandmother] loved us. She would bring us out to eat. She was everything we needed [in a substitute mother]. We even started calling her Mamá and we loved her a lot and I still love her even now. But she started to have a hatred toward us, and we didn't know why. She started abusing us worse and worse. Everything we did, everything we touched was wrong. (15B, 12 years old, Honduras)

Youth said maintaining a transnational relationship with their mother while separated was important and was maintained through phone and video calls and sending packages. “I feel good [about my mom’s decision] because [in the United States,] she would sell things and send us the money. She’s never been a bad mom. She would send boxes of clothes for us [to Honduras]” (9B, 13 years old, Honduras). For some, their substitute caregiver had considerable control over the narratives they learned about their mother and the reasons for her absence.

It’s that my step-grandmother put a lot of ideas in our heads. She told us that my mom had to prostitute to feed us, and she convinced us to believe that [my mom] really did that. They put a lot of things on me. (15B, 12 years old, Honduras)

For youth with strong attachments to substitute caregivers, maintaining strong relationships and regular communication with family in the country of origin was vital for their emotional well-being and adjustment to life in the United States after migration:

I didn’t have that trust that moms and kids have, so I felt like my aunt understood me better than my mom, and I wanted to go back to Honduras and everything. But there’s no turning back now, so I talk with [my aunt] every other day [on the phone]. (3B, 15 years old, Honduras)

Processes

In dimensional analysis, processes refer to actions and interactions in the conditions youth experience that contribute to positive or negative outcomes. Many youths and their mothers described experiencing ambiguous loss and migratory and disenfranchised grief.

Ambiguous Loss

Youth struggled with reconciling the physical loss of their parents during key developmental periods with the knowledge that their mother made these sacrifices for their long-

term benefit. “Sometimes I get sad because they left me, and I needed them, and I was little. I had to grow up with only a dad. But sometimes I say that they did it for our benefit” (8B, 15 years old, Honduras). Youth recalled growing up believing that although their mother was present from a distance in their lives, they would probably never get to see her again: “I just want to be near [my mom] because I thought I’d never see her again” (7B, 10 years old, El Salvador).

Like youth, mothers also experienced ambiguous loss. In a cruel twist, their love for their children and desire to provide them with a safe and secure future led to their separation. Being physically distant yet trying to foster emotional closeness characterizes mothers’ experiences of ambiguous loss. One mother described the ambiguity of providing for her children while not being physically with them as “*una moneda de dos caras*” or “a double-sided coin.”

[Separating] was not the right thing to do. ... On one hand, it wasn’t right to leave my children because I know that they suffered a lot and I know that now, long term, there are consequences. Because I am paying the consequences. On one hand, it was good. On the other, it wasn’t. It’s like a double-sided coin. I came, supposedly, to no longer live a life of suffering and to give my children a better future, but on the other hand, I lost my children’s love. I lost. I didn’t enjoy my children. (3A, 41 years old, Honduras)

While separated, mothers describe desperately longing to be with their children, despite knowing how tenuous their chances were given the political circumstances and dangers of unauthorized migration. For some mothers, this intense longing and concern for the loss of their children resulted in serious emotional reactions.

I was rarely able to talk [to my daughter]. I cried so much for my daughter. I got to the point that I wanted to die by suicide. I tried to kill myself a bunch of times because I felt

like everything was my fault—I left her to come here, and I would never see her again.

(6A, 34 years old, Guatemala)

Before, I fell into a depression because I didn't have either of my two sons and now at least, thanks to God, I have one with me. I have the other, too, but he's more understanding and he would like to be here [with me], too, but you know what it's like on the journey. (9A, 27 years old, Honduras)

Even following reunification in the United States, youth often experienced the ambiguous loss of their mother due to busy work schedules and other family dynamics. Despite their mother's physical presence, youth described emotional distance due to the nature of work and being isolated from family in this country.

I felt good [being with my mom again], and sometimes on the weekends, my mom didn't know how to drive, and we would go to a place and walk around, and I enjoyed it. But I didn't like when the weekdays came because she goes to work really early, at like 6 a.m., and didn't come home until 6 or 7 p.m., so all day, I would just be with my aunt, playing with my cousins. (8B, 15 years old, Mexico)

Migratory Grief

U.S. immigration policies that detain, deport, and separate family members have played a major role in family separation and reunification among families from Mexico and Central America. One youth described the emotional challenges he experienced after being separated from his primary caregiver at the U.S. border after traveling together from Honduras to seek safety from gang violence and reunification with his mother in the United States. This youth grieved both the deportation of his great-grandmother, who cared for him most of his life, and the fact that he still hadn't reunified with his brother, who remained in their home country: "I

was with my grandma and when she was deported, I felt like the world was taken from underneath me. And now my heart is broken in half; the half that I'm missing is my brother" (9B, 13 years old, Honduras).

Following reunification in the United States, youth described psychological, interpersonal and somatic reactions evoked by leaving everything familiar and the lost time with their family they can never recover. "I lost pretty much everything because it has been a change. I lost my family. I lost my friends. I lost everything. Except my mom, that's the only thing I haven't lost" (11B, 11 years old, El Salvador).

Youth and their mothers often experienced significant tension during family reunification. At least initially, they struggled to align their cultural norms and social and familial expectations during reunification. Often, these tensions arose because of unfamiliarity and awkwardness after long periods of physical distance.

Being with my mom isn't that stressful, but you have to get used to her. Because me and her have different ways of being. There are things that she doesn't like that I like to do. Like, I want to be a certain way, and she doesn't want to let me be that certain way. (3B, 15 years old, Honduras)

Youth who reunified with their mother in the United States also described the grief they felt for the family members, community, and everything they left behind in their country of origin:

Yeah, I regret coming here to the U.S. because of [my brother]; because he tells me, "Don't come back here, brother. Better yet, save money and send for me. I don't want to be here anymore because [the gang members] will kill me ... soon. (9B, 13 years old, Honduras)

Disenfranchised Grief

By migrating, sending remittances, and funding their child's journey to the United States, mothers made tremendous sacrifices to provide a better and safer future for their children. However, the loss of their mother's physical presence, alongside other losses associated with leaving their country of origin and their substitute caregivers, were sources of unresolved grief among the youth in this study. Mothers were often blamed for their child's challenges due to migrating without them. Therefore, the grief that mothers experienced often went unrecognized, unacknowledged, and even stigmatized by those around them. "[The most stressful experience for me has been] dealing with the sequelae of trauma that they've diagnosed [my daughter] with disassociation from reality and posttraumatic stress. To feel, to a certain point, responsible for what happened to her" (11A, 32 years old, El Salvador). "I'm not sure [my mom] did the right thing [by leaving me], but I think it was necessary. Maybe it would have been better if she would have brought me with her when she came to the U.S." (2B, 17 years old, Mexico).

Mothers also experienced internalized disenfranchisement, often blaming themselves for the challenges that their children experienced as a result of their separation.

On one hand, I think I did [the right thing by migrating separately], but on the other hand, I think I didn't [do the right thing] because of [my son's] rebelliousness. I blame myself. I say, for wanting to give them the best, it's now become the worst because [my son] is very rebellious. I lifted a weight from my life when I arrived here, and I thanked God a million times because I knew my children wouldn't starve. That they wouldn't go to bed with empty stomachs. I lifted that weight off, but now I have another because [my son's] rebelliousness maybe could have been avoided if I had brought him with me or if I hadn't come at all. Unfortunately, in our country, no one comes and says, "Here, have this pound of beans." (9A, 27 years old, Honduras)

Consequences

In dimensional analysis, the consequences are the results of interactions between conditions and processes (Schatzman, 1991). This dimensional analysis revealed consequences of interactions between conditions (stress, trauma, and quality of relationships with and among caregivers) and processes (ambiguous loss, migratory grief, and disenfranchised grief) following separation and subsequent reunification with mothers.

Attachment Quality

Both mothers and youth risked a great deal to find relative safety and reunify with each other; the desire to reunite, despite its risks, was clear: “[My relationship with my mom] has changed a lot. We’re happier now, and things aren’t how they were when I couldn’t see her” (7B, El Salvador). Both youth and mothers described efforts and experiences of reconnecting, reattuning, and rebuilding their relationship. Mothers expressed the desire to be the safe, accessible and engaged attachment figure their children needed.

I feel really, really happy that I’m with my mom and also because no mother does [what she did]. From the moment she stepped foot here, in the U.S., she’s only thinking about us. Every moment she has, she’s thinking of us and trying to find a way to talk to us and all that. I am so grateful to her for that. (15B, Honduras, 13 years old)

Although youth deeply desired a strong relationship with their mother, some said that they may never achieve the type or quality of a relationship that they would like due to the attachment disruption they experienced during separation. This was particularly true among youth who separated from their mother for longer or during key developmental periods.

Well, ... it’s all the same now that I’m with her, but before, every time I would get scared, I would hide under my bed and I would say, “Please, let me meet my mom and

after that, you can do whatever you'd like with me." I just wanted to meet her, but after arriving here, I even told her that she wasn't my mom because of the stress that you suffer and being locked in. ... It's hard to control. (3B, 15 years old, Honduras)

Mothers faced resentment from their children for being left behind. This led to challenges in the mother-child relationship during the reunification period. Youth and mothers described a lack of *confianza*, or trust in each other, following their separation.

[The most stressful part] is understanding each other and communication. [My mom] doesn't really know what I like, and I also don't know what she likes. She says that sometimes she is afraid to ask me things because she doesn't know how I'll respond. We still can't talk freely because there's still like this ... lack of trust. It's as if I can't open up and tell her all the things I'd like to. (14B, 18 years old, El Salvador)

Youth demonstrated a cognitive understanding of their mother's need to migrate without them, but they struggled to make emotional sense of what this loss meant about their relationship. The conflicting emotions associated with the ambiguous loss of their mother and other family members led to cognitive and emotional dissonance, affecting the quality of the parent-child relationship during the reunification phase.

I feel like [my daughter] believes that we destroyed her, in the sense of her feelings, because sometimes she has told me, "You guys have broken my feelings. You guys have done this." And that hurts me. Sometimes I tell her, "My love, we didn't do it intentionally. Your dad and I didn't do it intentionally, it just happened." Maybe I let him abuse me for far too long, and I didn't do anything about it until I finally made the decision. I didn't realize how it affected my daughter. (6A, 34 years old, Guatemala)

Another mother described how her daughter's lack of positive attachments during childhood led her to become overly attached to other adults while struggling to trust her mother. She struggled to express to her daughter that among attachment figures, as her mother, she was unique:

The girls felt a lot of hatred toward me. [My daughter] thought about her foster parents from the detention center a lot. She even told me that she wanted to leave and go back there again, and I told her, "I am your mom, and no one will look after you better than me. The woman who took care of you was really good to you, but they paid her, and no one pays me to take care of you, to show you love." That's what I told her. (15A, 37 years old, Honduras)

Reactions to Attachment

Youth believed that their mother did the right thing by leaving them behind and migrating; however, they expressed their emotional pain about the separation. For example, some youth described wanting to be with their mother while simultaneously refusing to talk to her on the phone or video chat due to feelings of sadness, anger, and rejection.

[Our relationship] is much better now. Before, [me and my mom] didn't talk even though I had a phone and she had a phone, we didn't talk. It was mostly my fault because at first, I would make up an excuse that I didn't have a phone or that I couldn't talk with them. Then [my mom and stepdad] sent me a phone and still I didn't. I don't know. I don't know why. I don't know what happened. (15B, 12 years old, Honduras)

The incongruence between what youth know and feel became evident in their descriptions of longing to be with their mother while simultaneously seeing her as a stranger.

At first it was pretty weird. When I first arrived for about four months and after, something [bad] was always happening to me and the relationship with my mom is like anything else: ... there are ups and downs. But at first, it was weird. I didn't believe that she was my mom. (8B, 15 years, Mexico)

Other youth described feeling sad, avoidant, and wanting to run away following reunification due to feeling a stronger attachment with others who had physically cared for them.

Then, arriving [in the U.S.], I resented [my mom]. When I first arrived, my first week here [with my mom], I cried all night. I couldn't hold it in. I felt like I was drowning, and when we were in [Office of Refugee Resettlement custody] for almost three months, our foster dad was really good to us, and we missed them and wanted to be back there. (15B, 12 years old, Honduras)

Some youth said they wanted to run away from settings outside of their home, manifesting in inappropriate behaviors at school, due to the attachment distress they experienced and other sources of stress, including their detention by the Office of Refugee Resettlement.

When we dropped [my son] off at school, we had to battle with him. He was afraid that we would leave him and he'd be locked up again. That was a challenge; the first three days, he would hit and throw everything. I had to be [at his school] hiding in a corner to make sure he didn't run away until I told him, "This can't continue to happen." I told him. (7A, 26 years old, El Salvador)

Although mothers cognitively understood the reasons for their children's distance or behavioral disruptions, many felt invalidated or misunderstood. Although many were unsure how to mend and repair the attachment ruptures with their children, they expressed commitment to improving their relationship.

Right now, I'm super stressed with [my son]. I want to have a good relationship as son and mother, and I want him to forgive me for leaving him. I feel stressed so much. I try to talk with him, but it's as if he doesn't want to listen. (3A, 41 years old, Honduras)

I try the best that I can to show [my daughter] my love, and sometimes she gets to where she doesn't want to talk to anyone, but she knows that I love her. I tell her every moment I can. Maybe [our reunification] hasn't been what I wanted, nor is she the way I'd like her to be, but I can't make her be how I want her to be. (6A, 34 years, Guatemala)

Discussion

The analysis led to five key findings: First, family separation is not a discrete event. Youth often experience multiple separations from mothers and other caregivers, and these separations frequently occur across stages of development. Second, families experience ongoing stress and trauma after reunification. Third, youth and mothers experience ambiguous loss and migratory grief that are often disenfranchised and unrecognized inside and external to the family system. Disenfranchised grief and loss increases psychological distress among individuals and in the family system. Fourth, ambiguous loss and migratory grief can cause attachment ruptures (Cedeño, 2021) and ultimately affect the quality of relationships. Some families experience ruptures in attachments that start during separation and culminate during reunification. Fifth, despite these unanticipated ruptures in mother–youth attachment, mothers strive to repair their relationship with their children and demonstrate great posttraumatic growth.

Family Separation is Not a Discrete Event

Separating from attachment figures during childhood shapes how youth experience the world and approach relationships. Research on migration-related family separation often described it as a single event that occurs when a family member migrates either internally or

internationally, leaving their children with a substitute caregiver (Lu et al., 2020). It is often assumed that family separation ceases once a child is reunified with a parent. This fails to account for the circumstances that perpetuate separations and losses as a member of a transnational family and the resources needed to address this (Anschütz & Mazzucato, 2022).

Like Anschütz and Mazzucato (2022), we found evidence that youth “accumulate caregivers throughout their lifetime” (p. 163). Youth engaged with multiple caregivers and often moved between households in their country of origin. Additionally, Anschütz and Mazzucato (2022) advocated a focus on positive gains in these transnational family structures, redefining family reunification as the act of rejoining the primary caregiver. Despite the negative consequences of separation, we found that youth who were physically safe, felt a sense of belonging with their substitute caregivers, and remained emotionally connected to their mother despite physical distance were more likely to be stable and thriving after a difficult period of transition. Youth should be encouraged to maintain and protect relationships with caregivers they leave behind. This continuity of care, albeit transnational, can reduce attachment ruptures and protect mental health.

Legal Status and Threats of Deportation Cause Stress and Trauma after Reunification

Mother–youth dyads described incredible adversity prior to and during the migration journey. Many mothers and youth assumed they would face less adversity in the United States. However, they described poverty, unstable employment, food insecurity, and community and gang violence in U.S. communities. U.S. immigration policies created a constant sense of insecurity and impermanence for these youth and mothers. Some mother–youth dyads described the deportation of family members that recreated family separation after reunification had occurred. Some families described separation and deportation of family at the U.S.–Mexico

border, and almost all youth described an initial separation from family while they awaited placement in Office of Refugee and Resettlement shelters. In the post reunification context, mother–youth dyads lived in a state of “illegality,” whereby their legal status trapped them in a state of vulnerability and deportability (Berger Cardoso et al., 2018; Dreby, 2015). Living with “illegally” every day has negative consequences on family processes, parent–child relationships, and the well-being of parents and their children (Berger Cardoso et al., 2018). Scared for their safety, mothers and youth often described being “locked in” as a source of stress.

Ambiguous Loss and Migratory Grief are Often Disenfranchised and Unrecognized

Mothers and youth experienced migratory grief, including disconnection from language, family, culture, and community. Family separation, in addition to these concurrent losses, was also ambiguous in that it could not be easily defined (Cedeño, 2021; Falicov, 2002; Jerves et al., 2020). Mothers and youth said they feel similar stigma and shame for engaging in serial and often unauthorized migration. Yet these experiences of migratory grief and ambiguous loss were often negated by a public perception of them as “voluntary migrants.” These findings are consistent with research by Sanchez and colleagues (2021), who documented experiences of ambiguous loss and disenfranchised grief among Mexican immigrants and their children. In their work, the sample consisted of U.S.-born children, the focus was on family separation, but not specifically migration related separation between mothers and children. In their sample, most children were U.S. citizens. We build from their work by examining these concepts in the context of parent–child separation through migration.

Disenfranchised grief can also occur in the nuclear family when personal experiences of loss are not recognized and permission to grieve is not accepted (Doka, 2008). Kauffman (2002) identified this as an intrapsychic dimension of disenfranchised grief, which occurs when societal

rules of grief are internalized with judgment, guilt, and shame. In our study, youth discussed this kind of disenfranchised grief, describing complex emotions about being reunified with their mother. On one hand, they wanted to repair the attachment disruptions caused by the separation, but on the other hand, they were angry about being left and then resented having to leave their life and family behind in their home country. When mothers acknowledged this grief, the relationship was repaired and these interactions improved closeness. However, when mothers perpetuated this disenfranchised grief by not acknowledging their child's ambivalence about the separation and migration to the United States, it led to empathic failure (i.e., failure to understand a person's experience and meaning associated with loss; see Neimeyer & Jordan, 2002). Empathic failure created deeper distance and disruption in the mother–youth attachment and affected the quality of the relationship.

Attachment Ruptures Lead to Challenges with Reunification

Youth understood cognitively why their mother had to migrate—as a last resort for the family's security and future. Yet they experienced cognitive dissonance, often seeing their mother's migration as both an act of survival and emotional and physical abandonment. These conflicting feelings frequently lead to resentment, anger, and symptoms of depression and anxiety in both youth and mothers. Consistent with attachment theory (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2008), we found that the absence of emotional and physical proximity often hindered mothers' ability to establish emotional attunement, safety, and predictability. Prior research described similar attachment ruptures among recently arrived unaccompanied children from Mexico and Central America (Cedeño, 2021; Greenfield et al., 2020; Venta et al., 2020). These ruptures have consequences for relationship quality after reunification. Moreover, similar to prior work (Berger

Cardoso et al., 2023; Grace et al., 2018), we found that the anticipatory stressor of family separation via deportation from the United States challenged youths' sense of relational security.

Youth' self-determination and participation in the decision to migrate to the United States affected the mother–youth relationship. Falicov (2014) discussed the concept of coaxed migration, or migration that occurs reluctantly or without choice. Youth spoke about their reluctance or even opposition to leaving family in their country of origin. In these cases, youth struggled with anger and resentment about having to leave caregivers, family, friends, and community behind. Ambiguous loss and migratory grief often went unaddressed, and these confusing feelings made it more difficult for youth to trust their mother and concentrate on school, community, and family integration. As such, an important part of repairing the mother–youth attachment relationship involves addressing the tensions between voluntary and forced migration for youth.

Evidence of Posttraumatic Growth

Although immigrant youth and mothers experienced incredible hardship, they also demonstrated resilience and posttraumatic growth. They spoke frequently about the concept of *saliendo adelante* (getting ahead), emphasizing repairing their relationship and supporting their children in taking advantage of opportunities and achieving their goals. Mothers and youth acknowledged the trauma and attachment disruptions they experienced but demonstrated great maturity and a nuanced understanding of the complex situation of serial migration. They described spending quality time with family as a primary strength that is necessary for their happiness and well-being. They viewed creating spaces of shared experiences and reconnection to family as critical to their ability to get ahead.

Study Limitations

During data collection, the COVID-19 pandemic interfered with data collection procedures. Originally, we had proposed to conduct interviews with all 16 mother–youth dyads in person. However, many interviews occurred online in response to the pandemic. Although we had a diverse sample of Mexican and Central American dyads, only 16 families participated and therefore, we did not have representation from all countries in the region. We recruited families that had experienced short-term and long-term separations. We assume outcomes among families varied to some degree depending on the length of the separation. However, because of our sample size, we could not conduct subgroup analyses. Middle school-aged youth were oversampled in this study. With a larger sample, it would be interesting to examine differences by age, because older adolescents (e.g., 16–18 years) may have unique insights into their relationship with their mother that younger children and adolescents (e.g., 10–14 years) do not. Another limitation of generalizability is that this study focused on youth who had been reunified with their mother. Outcomes for youth who are reunified with their father and other caregivers or sponsors in the United States may be distinct and necessitate future investigation. Finally, many of our families experienced trauma that was intergenerational and complex, which added to the complexity of our work on family separation. Future research might explore how these other adverse experiences affect the family reunification process; our interviews suggested that they do, but we could not dissect family experiences with that degree of specificity.

Implications for Policy, Practice, and Research

Few treatments target attachment disruption and migratory grief in families separated by migration. Scholars have adapted family therapy approaches to address distress during reunification (Falicov, 2014). For example, “rebalancing the contract” is one strategy for working with families experiencing ambivalence about migration (Falicov, 2014, p. 106).

Clinicians can help families renegotiate the terms of their migration, including conversations about a possible return to their home country. Also, the use of *testimonios* (testimony) can build empathy, as can sharing an oral, written, or recorded account of loss, grief, and trauma. This can address empathic failure in the context of disenfranchised grief. Specific to family separation and reunification, therapists should assist with reunification by building explicit communication, reducing relational distress, and rebuilding connection (Greenfield et al., 2020).

Researchers and clinicians can work collaboratively on the cultural adaptation of these treatment approaches. Often, interventions are initially developed for U.S. children and applied to unaccompanied minors in clinical settings. However, these interventions often require a strong parent–child relationship, which is not necessarily present in the reunification context. Additionally, researchers and clinicians should work together to decolonize the approach toward mental health treatment (Maximé, 2020). This requires building treatment approaches from the bottom up (i.e., built in and with the community) with community-based participatory action research. Building on prior interventions for unaccompanied minors from Central America (Greenfield et al., 2020), the authors are currently applying CBPR approaches to build a group-based attachment intervention for mothers and youth separated by migration (Borelli et al., 2021). Addressing attachment disruption, ambiguous loss, and migratory grief in the context of culture can strengthen families, build resilience, and buffer the negative consequences of migration-related trauma. These interventions should emphasize empowerment and be developed with an anti-oppressive framework—i.e., built in and with the community involvement.

Finally, mothers and youth described extreme poverty, community and state-sponsored violence, and intergenerational trauma as catalysts for migration. Conditions in Mexico and Central America are partially due to neocolonial control over the economic, fiscal, and

international trade policies in the region and environmental injustice leading to the increasing intensity and frequency of natural disasters (Ambrosius, 2021; Willams et al., 2022).

Immigration policies that directly address and prioritize family unity are needed, with a hard boundary against forced separation at the border and via the deportation of parents of U.S. citizen and foreign-born children. One actionable step is the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The purpose of the UNCRC is to establish protections that support the healthy development of children, including their rights to survival, education, nurturing and protection from violence and abuse. The U.S. signed the convention in 1999 but remains the only member of the United Nations to not ratify it.

Acknowledgments

This study was funded by the University of Houston Division of Research grants program. We would like to dedicate this paper to the courageous families who shared their stories with us.

They were brave to recount the parts of their life they find painful; their resilience and desire for a better life is truly remarkable. The primary author would also like to acknowledge the research and mentorship of Dr. Liza Barros Lane, whose journey with loss and grief inspired much of the theoretical underpinnings of this paper.

Conflict of Interest

The authors listed on this paper do not have any conflicts of interest to report.

Data Sharing

Due to the sensitive nature of the research, supporting data are not available.

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Table 1*Sample Demographics*

Variables	<i>n</i>	%	<i>M (SD)</i>	Range
Youth age at interview			13.5 (2.48)	10-18
10–12	5	31.2		
13–15	8	50		
16–18	3	18.8		
Youth gender				
Female	9	56.2		
Male	7	43.8		
Youth age at migration			8.8 (3.79)	2-13
0–3	2	12.5		
4–7	4	25.0		
8–11	3	18.8		
12–15	7	43.7		
Country of origin				
El Salvador	4	25.0		
Guatemala	2	12.5		
Honduras	7	43.7		
Mexico	3	18.8		
Length of mother–youth separation			5.06 (2.89)	0-10
0–3 years	5	31.3		

4–6 years	7	43.7		
7+ years	4	25.0		
Mother age at interview			35.5 (6.62)	26–55
26–35	9	56.3		
36–45	6	37.5		
46–55	1	6.3		
Alternative caregiver during separation				
Maternal grandparent	9	56.3		
Maternal aunt	2	12.5		
Biological father	2	12.5		
Other	3	18.8		

Table 2*Sample Separation Descriptives*

Dyad	Country of origin	Length of separation	Youth age at separation	Mother age at separation
1A/1B	Guatemala	5 years	5 years old	27 years old
2A/2B	Mexico	1 year	4 years old	21 years old
3A/3B	Honduras	9 years	1 year old	28 years old
4A/4B	Honduras	4 years	3 years old	31 years old
5A/5B	Honduras	< 1 month	9 years old	31 years old
6A/6B	Guatemala	2 years	2 years old	22 years old
7A/7B	El Salvador	4 years	3 years old	20 years old
8A/8B	Mexico	6 years	< 1 year old	37 years old
9A/9B	Honduras	5 years	5 years old	19 years old
10A/10B	Honduras	9 years	3 years old	21 years old
11A/11B	El Salvador	< 6 months	2 years old	22 years old
12A/12B	El Salvador	6 years	7 years old	26 years old
13A/13B	Honduras	6 years	5 years old	25 years old
14A/14B	El Salvador	10 years	2 years old	22 years old
15A/15B	Honduras	4 years	7 years old	32 years old
16A/16B	Mexico	2 years	1 year old	24 years old

Table 3*Dimensions, Codes, and Definitions*

Dimension	Subcodes	Definition
Perspective		
Central organizing feature	Mother	Any instance in which the mother describes an experience of separation or loss
	Youth	Any instance in which the youth describes an experience of separation or loss
	Other	Any instance in which the mother or youth describes an experience of separation or loss from another's perspective
Context		
Situation in which dimensions are embedded	Separation or loss	Any instance in which the mother or youth describes an experience of loss or separation from a loved one
Conditions		
Conditions that facilitate, block, or shape processes and consequences	Interpersonal	Any instance in which the mother or youth describes conditions associated with interpersonal or domestic violence as catalyst for migration or separation
	Violence	
	Community violence	Any instance in which the mother or youth describes conditions associated with community violence as catalyst for migration or separation
	Poverty	Any instance in which the mother or youth describes conditions associated with poverty as catalyst for migration or separation
	Experiences with	Any instance in which the mother or youth describes conditions

	family in home country	associated with family in home country as catalyst for migration or separation
	Experiences with youth's father in home country	Any instance in which the mother or youth describes the quality of the relationship with the youth's father in home country
	Goals or expectations for migration or separation	Any instance in which the mother or youth describes goals or expectations of migration and/or separation (e.g., better life economically, better education for children)
	Conditions of separation	Any instance in which the mother or youth describes conditions as a result of separation (e.g., quality of relationship with alternate caregiver, experiences with communication)
Processes		
Actions or interactions that occur as a result of conditions	Quality of relationship with alternative caregivers	Any instance in which the mother or youth describes the quality of their relationship with alternative caregivers (e.g., aunt, grandma, etc.)
	Experiences during migration	Any instance in which the mother or youth describes experiences during migration journey and consequences
	Quality of mental, behavioral, or physical health during separation	Any instance in which the mother or youth describes the quality of their mental, behavioral, or physical health during separation and the consequences
	Experiences with detention	Any instance in which the mother or youth describes experiences with or in detention in any country
	Experiences with deportation (self or	Any instance in which the mother or youth describes experiences

	family)	with deportation of them or loved ones
	Separation from loved ones during migration journey	Any instance in which the mother or youth describes separations from loved ones during the migration journey and consequences
	Quality of relationship with parent during separation	Any instance in which the mother or youth describes their relationship during separation
	Strategies used to maintain or rebuild relationship	Any instance in which the mother or youth describes strategies used to maintain or rebuild relationships following reunification and consequences
	Other actions or processes	Any instance in which the mother or youth describes other actions or processes that occurred as a result of separation or migration
Consequences		
Outcomes	Quality of relationship with parent following reunification	Any instance in which the mother or youth describes the quality of their relationship following reunification and consequences
	Quality of relationship with siblings or other family members following reunification	Any instance in which the mother or youth describes the quality of their relationship with siblings or other family members following reunification and consequences
	Quality of relationship with peers following reunification	Any instance in which the mother or youth describes the quality of their relationship with peers following reunification and consequences
	Experiences in school	Any instance in which the mother or youth describes the youth's

or the community following reunification	experiences in school or the community following reunification and consequences
Quality of mental, behavioral, or physical health following migration and reunification	Any instance in which the mother or youth describes the quality of their mental, behavioral, or physical health following reunification and consequences
Grief or missing out on lost time	Any instance in which the mother or youth describes grief or missing out on lost time as a result of separation or migration and consequences
Other consequences	Any instance in which the mother or youth describes other consequences of separation, reunification, or loss

Table 4*Definitions and Core Categories Discovered through the Analytic Process*

Dimension	Core Categories
Context: Situation in which dimensions are embedded	• Violence • Poverty
Perspective: Central organizing feature of the analysis	• Multiple separations
Conditions: Factors that facilitate, block, or shape processes and consequences	• Stress and trauma • Quality of relationships
Processes: Actions or interactions that occur as a result of conditions	• Ambiguous loss • Grief - Migratory grief - Disenfranchised grief
Consequences: Outcomes	• Attachment quality

Table 5*Author Reflexivity Statements in Order of Authorship*

Author	Reflexivity Statement
1	I am a White, cisgender, heterosexual woman and mother of two second-generation Mexican children. I was born in a Catholic–Jewish family in New Orleans, Louisiana. I spent 3 years as a Peace Corps volunteer in Santo Domingo, Ecuador. I currently hold a tenured faculty position and operate a clinical practice in Texas. As a light-skinned, blue-eyed, educated woman with U.S. citizenship, I recognize that I enter the clinical and research space with privileges not afforded to others. I acknowledge and respect my outsider status in the work I do.
2	I am a white, cisgender, U.S. citizen and mother to a young adolescent born in Latin America. My perspective is shaped by my privileged status in the United States and my time living in Latin America and working with immigrant and refugee families on the Mexican and U.S. sides of the border. Although I have insight into the experiences of migrant families grounded in years of professional work and personal experience, I am an outsider and bring this etic perspective to the research process.
3	I am a cisgender woman born in Mexico and raised in the United States. My perspective is informed by navigating the United States as a bicultural–bilingual Latina from an immigrant family and working with immigrant families in research and clinical contexts. I immigrated to the United States as a very young child and recognize the heterogeneity of the experiences of Latin American immigrant children and families, especially in my privilege of speaking English and not experiencing the sociopolitical contexts of living in Mexico and the Northern Triangle. These and additional factors limit my ability to fully understand the experiences of the families in our study.

- 4 As a mixed-race (Mexican and White) woman who is able-bodied, heterosexual, and a mother of a young child raised in the United States, my perspective is shaped by being part of the cultural mainstream while also having deep Mexican American roots tracing back eight generations. Though English is my first language, my Mexican heritage and Spanish fluency provide insight into being Latino in the United States. However, my privileged status lacking disability, documentation status issues, and direct experiences of parental separation as a child introduces limitations in fully relating to the challenges faced by my research participants.
- 5 I identify as a Xicana of Mexican Indigenous descent (Purépecha and Mexico). I am a first-generation bilingual clinical social worker and proud daughter of immigrant parents.
- 6 My perspective is deeply shaped by my experiences as a bilingual queer cisgender immigrant from El Salvador. Having grown up in both the United States and El Salvador, my lens is shaped by my immigration experiences in ways similar to those of the participants. At the same time, my identities of privilege, including having access to documentation, navigation of U.S. culture, fluency in English, and access to higher education, limit my insight into the experiences of participants with different intersectional identities. As an insider–outsider to this work, my understanding of participants’ experiences is limited.
- 7 I am a White cisgender woman from the Northeast United States. Beginning in childhood, I have had experiences of extended time living in Guatemala and considerable experience traveling, studying, and collecting data in Latin America. Throughout these experiences, I am shaped by my White, native English-speaking, U.S. citizen, educated, cisgender, and heterosexual identities.
- 8 I am a White, cisgender, heterosexual woman and mother of three children. I am Jewish American. I have collaborated in Latinx communities for the past 10 years. As a White, light-skinned, green-eyed, educated, English-speaking woman with U.S. citizenship, I have privilege

not afforded to others.

- 9 I am a White, cisgender, heterosexual woman, wife, and mother of two children. I am a South African citizen living in the United States on a green card and therefore, considered a resident alien. I conduct NIH-funded research in South Africa, my home country, with orphans and vulnerable children and in the United States with vulnerable communities affected by attachment disruption and health disparity. English is my second language, and despite my status as a foreigner and resident alien, the fact that I'm White and educated affords me privileges that are denied to others.
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Table 6

Separation and Loss Timelines

[illegible]

Case ID	Country	Family separation	Loss	Significant trauma	Family reunification	Age at interview
8B	Mexico	Family separation	Loss	Significant trauma	Family reunification	Age at interview
9B	Honduras	Family separation	Loss	Significant trauma	Family reunification	Age at interview
10B	Honduras	Family separation	Loss	Significant trauma	Family reunification	Age at interview
11B	El Salvador	Family separation	Loss	Significant trauma	Family reunification	Age at interview
12B	El Salvador	Family separation	Loss	Significant trauma	Family reunification	Age at interview
13B	Honduras	Family separation	Loss	Significant trauma	Family reunification	Age at interview
14B	El Salvador	Family separation	Loss	Significant trauma	Family reunification	Age at interview
15B	Honduras	Family separation	Loss	Significant trauma	Family reunification	Age at interview
16B	Mexico	Family separation	Loss	Significant trauma	Family reunification	Age at interview

Figure 1

Explanatory Matrix Depicting Dimensions of Migration-Related Separation

