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Gap or overlap? Parent-child acculturation differences in Mexican immigrant families

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Abstract

This study explored acculturation differences between Mexican immigrant parents and children and effects on parent-child relationships, using modified analytic inductive analysis of semi-structured interviews with one immigrant parent and one adolescent child from 30 Mexican families from Phoenix, Arizona. Three categories of parent-child acculturation were identified: no differences (N = 4), minor differences (N = 21), and major differences (N = 5). Children affiliated with American culture more than their parents did, but parents and children affiliated similarly with Mexican culture. Cultural differences were typically viewed as inevitable and normal rather than as unfortunate and abnormal. Parents and children described their relationships as close and reported efforts to decrease differences by developing a shared family culture. Parent-child conflict, where it existed, was viewed as generational or developmental rather than cultural. The findings support the new concept of “cultural overlap” to more accurately depict parent-child acculturation in immigrant families.

Key words: acculturation gap, family conflict, Mexican families, immigrants

Acculturation is the within-person mix of origin culture and new culture that develops as a result of intercultural contact (Berry, 1997). The link between acculturation and problem behaviors among U.S. youths is often attributed to acculturation differences between parents and their children (Voisine, Parsai, Marsiglia, Kulis, & Nieri, 2008; Schofield, Parke, Kim, & Coltrane, 2008). Children are typically assumed to be more oriented to mainstream American culture and less oriented to their origin culture than their immigrant parents due to their socialization in American schools (Santisteban & Mitrani, 2003). According to Hwang's (2006) Acculturative Family Distancing theory, parent-child acculturation differences may cause family conflict, undermine parental authority and family functioning, and place children at risk for problem behaviors (Birman, 2006; Martinez 2006). Little research formally examines these possibilities in Mexican immigrant families – in particular how family members themselves view the situation. This study investigates the presence, nature, and consequences of parent-child acculturation differences in Mexican immigrant families.

Quantitative research on parent-child acculturation differences has found a relationship between acculturation differences and undesirable youth outcomes, including parent-child relationship difficulties (Hofstetter et al., 2009; Dinh & Nguyen, 2006; Buki, Ma, Strom, & Strom, 2003). In these studies parent-child acculturation differences are commonly referred to as “acculturation gaps” (e.g., Ahn, Kim, & Park, 2008), suggesting a wide and undesirable difference. Yet, researchers commonly treat as a gap any actual or perceived difference between parent and child, regardless of size. While this literature indicates that parent-child differences may exist, it sheds little light on the size and nature of differences and how parents and adolescents view them. Some prior works focus on college students, not adolescents (Ahn, Kim,

& Park, 2006; Dinh & Nguyen, 2006), and few focus on Latinos (exceptions: Schofield, Parke, Kim, & Coltrane, 2008; Martinez, 2006).

Four studies have examined U.S. Mexican-heritage families. Gonzalez and colleagues (2006) found high correlations between parent and child acculturation levels, suggesting only small parent-child differences. Lau and colleagues (2005) found parent-child acculturation differences to be common, but not linked to family conflict or youth conduct problems. Marsiglia and colleagues (2010) found that compared to youths who were bicultural like their parent, only youths with more acculturated mothers had increased rates of externalizing disorders. One qualitative study (Bacallao & Smokowski, 2007) found that while parent-child acculturation differences were sometimes associated with conflict, families viewed them as an asset in that different members could meet different needs. These studies suggest that while parent-child acculturation differences may exist in Mexican-heritage families, they may not constitute “gaps,” relate to youth outcomes, or be viewed as a problem in families.

Unfortunately, prior studies have not separately analyzed differences in acculturation’s two domains: origin culture (e.g., Mexican) and host culture (e.g., American). Because acculturation is bidimensional (Berry, 1997), a person can acquire American culture without giving up their origin culture and vice versa. Since acculturation’s relationship to behavior varies by dimension (Coatsworth, Maldonado-Molina, Pantin, & Szapocznik, 2005), there is a need to consider parent-child acculturation differences in origin culture separately from differences in American culture (Birman, 2006). By qualitatively exploring the nature and extent of parent-child acculturation differences and the quality of parent-child relationships in Mexican immigrant families, we address the questions left unanswered by prior research.

Methods

Data

Data came from 30 Mexican immigrant families living in Phoenix, Arizona, a city in which 41% percent of residents are of Hispanic or Latino origin and 22% are foreign born (U.S. Census, 2012). One parent, born outside the United States, and one adolescent child, aged 13 to 18 years, from each family participated in the study. In families where multiple children were eligible, the parents identified the participating child. Semi-structured interviews with each participant were tape-recorded and lasted about two hours. Interviews were conducted by the authors (a Latin American immigrant and a native-born European American, both bilingual English-Spanish) in 2005-2006 in the participants' location of choice (most often at home) and language of choice. Four Mexican parent interviews and eight Mexican child interviews were conducted in English, although the parents and all but one child were proficient in Spanish. Remaining interviews were in Spanish. Parents and children were interviewed separately by the same interviewer. In seven cases parents were present in the room while the child was interviewed. Participant names used in the paper are pseudonyms.

Parents' interview topics included when and why the family came to the United States; what they like best and is most difficult about raising children in the U.S.; how they describe their culture; whether their culture is the same as their children's culture; how they transmit culture to their children; what elements of culture they most wish to transmit; whether they observe differences in behavior and attitudes between them and their children; whether they worry that their culture will be not be passed on to the next generation; how they evaluate their performance as parents; what qualities make a good parent; what sources of parenting advice or support they rely on; how they compare their own childhood to their children's; whether there

are family conflicts; how they compare their own parenting to their parents' parenting and native-born Americans' parenting; and what concerns they have about their children.

Children's interviews covered the languages spoken at home and with friends and any feelings about them; how family members spend time together; extent and nature of disagreements and conflicts with parents; advantages and disadvantages of having immigrant parents; whether they get in trouble with their parents; if so, how, why, and to what end; rules at home and whether they wish to change them; whether they plan to parent as their parents do with them; their sources of advice or support; and family traditions they like and dislike.

Sample

We analyzed 60 interviews of parents and children from the 30 Mexican immigrant families. Families were recruited through the following avenues: three from English-as-a-Second-Language classes, two from a parenting class, three from schools, one via a news magazine advertisement, three via flyers, seven through participant referrals, two through the investigators' personal contacts, and nine through other or unknown means. The families lived throughout the city; a majority lived in predominately Latino neighborhoods. Families with two parents identified the parent to be interviewed.

On average participating parents were 39 years old ($SD = 5.62$) and in the U.S. for 10 years ($SD = 7.06$). A majority (93%) were female, and 62% were married. Thirty-eight percent completed an eighth grade education or less; 31% completed high school; and 31% had greater than a high school education. Seventy percent of their own parents had less than a high school education. Sixty-nine percent reported that they were employed; of these 30% were homemakers, 23% were cleaners, 10% were educators or childcare workers, and 36% worked in other occupations, ranging from administrative assistant to engineer. A majority (90%) reported that

the language they speak most often with their children is Spanish whereas 7% reported that language to be English and 3% reported equal use of both English and Spanish. Two-thirds (66%) reported having daily or weekly interaction with their extended family. We did not inquire about legal status, but 43.3% indicated that they were documented, 30.3% indicated they either were or might be undocumented, and 23.3% gave no information on legal status.

Participating children were 15 years old on average ($SD = 2.93$), 66% were female, and 20% were born in the United States. Among immigrants the average time in the U.S. was 8 years ($SD = 5.51$). Eleven children came from families with multiple eligible children and were nominated by their parent.

Analysis

We drew on Thomas' (2003) general inductive approach to condense data into brief summary format, link the research objectives and the summary findings from the raw data, and develop a model of the underlying experiences or processes evident in the raw data. We conducted modified analytic inductive analysis (Patton, 2002) to assess whether the data fit the acculturation gap framework described in the introduction. Since the investigators are bilingual, they transcribed and analyzed the interviews without needing to translate them. Quotes originally in Spanish that are presented in this paper were translated to English independently by each author and then compared and modified to achieve concordance.

To examine whether parents and children differed by acculturation, we relied on the prevailing conceptualization of acculturation as bidimensional (Berry, 1997), having Mexican and American dimensions. We assessed the extent to which parents and children identified as Mexican and/or American in the form of self labeling (e.g., "I see myself as Mexican"), behavior (e.g., language use, consumption of certain foods, celebration of holidays), or values (e.g., family

unity, freedom, respect for elders) (Zane & Mak, 2003). Parents were asked to describe their culture and their children's culture, with the following prompt: "Culture could include such things as ethnicity, language, traditions, holidays, food, values and beliefs." Their answers to this and related questions were used to determine the parent's identification with each culture. Children's answers to direct questions about language and traditions and other questions that indirectly revealed cultural information as well as parents' descriptions of the children's culture were used to determine the child's identification with each culture. We assessed whether acculturation differences were present by comparing parents' and children's reports of their own acculturation and by evaluating their own comparisons of their acculturation vis a vis the other person. Three categories of parent-child acculturation (no acculturation differences, minor differences, and major differences) and three themes of understandings of parent-child differences (inevitable, understandable, and/or concerning) emerged.

To assess parent-child relationship quality, we relied on participants' answers to direct questions of whether there was conflict in the relationship and answers to other questions in which they revealed evidence of parent-child closeness and/or conflicts. Three themes associated with closeness emerged: family unity, communication, and positive child outcomes/performance. Two themes emerged associated with conflicts: rules and independence.

Results

Parent-child acculturation differences

When parents and children described their own culture, all identified with Mexican culture. Maria, a 37-year-old high school graduate and mother of three who came to the U.S. 22 years ago, described how she teaches her children about her culture, Maria said, "Well, I've never stopped cooking beans! I talk about the culture with them [*her kids*]. I expose them to

Mexican music, tell them which singers are good and why. I speak Spanish with them. We celebrate Mexican holidays and practice Mexican traditions. I take them to Mexico.” Maria’s 18-year-old son John described his culture as Mexican American but felt he “definitely” had a little bit of both Mexican culture and American culture in him. He viewed his culture to be the same as his mother’s culture and spoke of the advantages of having an immigrant parent: “I learned a different language: Spanish. Then there’s a whole another culture, Mexican culture. I have relatives from a different country.” When asked whether it was important for him to learn Mexican culture, he responded, “Yeah, it’s important to learn... because that’s who you are....” While both the parent and child affiliated with Mexican culture, the son referred to the culture as “different,” suggesting that he acquired it by choice and effort.

Pablo, a 43-year-old lawyer and father of three who has lived in the U.S. for 14 years, and his son Brian, aged 17, showed a similar cultural concordance. Pablo describes his culture:

The Mexican culture is very rich. Spanish, we emphasize that in the house. All the kids are bilingual. And there’s always Mexican food. Church. We follow the Catholic tradition. We have a lot of books for the kids in Spanish. Even the tequila is in the house! We celebrate September 16, Independence Day. Christmas is a big deal. My mom makes the Mexican tradition way. Dia de los Muertos. Dia de los Reyes. Los Reyes Magos. We have different festivals. And then my mom and my dad will relate to some of the families that they have [*as friends*]. So we need to relate with families, especially the kids; they go to cumpleaños or birthdays, piñatas, and so they’re constantly around the family tradition.

Pablo's son Brian, born in Mexico and raised in the U.S., is fluent in Spanish because he speaks the language at home with his family, but mainly speaks English with his friends. Here, Brian describes his feelings about learning the culture of Mexico:

Brian: That's where we came from; so it's good to know where you came from.

Interviewer: Do you worry that part of the culture is lost? Do you think you'll be as tied to it as, say, your dad or your grandma and grandpa?

Brian: Probably not 'cause I'll end up living here for the rest of my life.

Interviewer: Do you think you have aspects of American in you?

Brian: I don't consider myself "part American." I don't know. Since I've lived here most of my life, I probably know it more than I know that culture, but I don't know. I guess I'm a part of it. My grandma's always telling me I'm Mexican.

Interviewer: Do you think you'd want to pass those things on?

Brian: Oh yeah.

Both Pablo and Brian report a connection to Mexican culture. However, Brian's words suggest that his connection to Mexican culture may be different than his father's. Like John, Brian "others" Mexican culture as he claims it, referring to it as "that culture." For these two children the claim to Mexican culture is deliberate but the claim to American culture is automatic due to growing up in the U.S. For the parents the reverse may be true: the tie to Mexican culture is automatic due to growing up in Mexico. Thus, we found concordance between parents' and children's self-described culture, despite differences in how it was acquired.

Our examination of perceptions of parent-child differences revealed variation in parents' perceptions of the similarity between their own and their children's cultures. Parents described differences between American and Mexican cultures, between their own and their children's

upbringing, and between childrearing in Mexico and the U.S. However, these differences rarely translated to a sense among parents that the children's culture was vastly different from their own. Four parents stated outright that they viewed their children as having the same culture as themselves. Five parents reported major differences between them and their children. The remaining parents (N = 21) reported minor differences; they saw their children's culture as only somewhat different on account of the children growing up in the United States. Margarita, who is a 40-year-old mother of three, has an elementary education, and has been living in the United States for 23 years, observed deviations from her own culture in her children's culture but also a strong connection between her children and their Mexican roots.

Margarita: It's about keeping roots together and the family and making sure they don't forget. The language was one. To me it didn't make any difference if they speak Spanish in school, but we spoke it at home. In fact, it's even kind of hard, if you ask my kids, which language they speak first because it's always been English and Spanish. Another thing is making sure they remember.... We cook some of the things that we used to cook back home. A lot of times we played dress up in colorful costumes. It can be Christmas where we have a posada, where you have the food and everybody come over and piñatas.

Interviewer: Have your kids adopted the same culture that you have or do you think that they, because they've grown up here, are slightly different?

Margarita: They may be slightly different due that we also change. We embrace the American culture too. So you would probably have different kinds of food. If you went to one of their Christmas Eve dinners, they might have the two different

kinds of food. Different kinds of decorations where there's the one from the U.S. and in my case from Mexico. I think that that would be different.

Despite these differences, Margarita expressed no fear that her children would lose their Mexican heritage because, "It's so in their heart."

Aida is among the five parents who described major differences between them and their children. A 40-year-old mother of two children who has an elementary education and has been living in U.S. for 11 years, she spoke of her own attachment to and appreciation for Mexican culture, but said that her daughter Leslie, aged 15 years, "thinks very differently. She's always emphasizing to me that I was brought up one way, and she should be brought up in another." Although Aida recognized her daughter's acquisition of American culture, she did not express concern that her daughter would lose her Mexican culture. While Aida would like Leslie "to always carry her [*Mexican*] culture deep in her heart," she had a strategy for accommodating both cultures in the family: "I try to give Leslie her place, and she tries to give me my place." Meanwhile, Leslie described her bilingualism and biculturalism as personal assets and said she planned on "showing...all the [*Mexican*] traditions" to her children one day. Thus, despite being different from her mother, she still had much in common with her.

Liliana, a 35-year-old high school graduate and mother of three who has been living in the U.S. for 10 years, also articulated major differences. Maintaining her culture was very important to Liliana; she wanted her children never to deny their Mexican heritage because, as she said, "I have lots of love for Mexico even though I live here!" Her middle child, however, was "flour from a different sack. For him the U.S. flag is the maximum!" Despite his love of U.S. culture, Liliana's son is fluent in Spanish and familiar with Mexican culture. Here, the parent and child share the same cultures but differ in their primary allegiances to those cultures.

All parents we interviewed described how they taught their children Mexican culture and preserved Mexican cultural traditions and values within the family. A majority (N = 18) of parents also described as inevitable or, at least, understandable some deviation in their children's culture from their own culture, and/or they expressed a willingness to accommodate such deviation. For example, although Liliana felt "nostalgic and sad" about what she perceived as her son's preference for U.S. culture, she made an effort to learn American culture through him. She described how her son guided her and her husband through their first Thanksgiving meal by telling them what to cook and reminding them to pray beforehand. Maria described how learning American culture helped her maintain a tie to her children:

It is important to maintain culture, but it is also important to learn my kids' culture. They are born here, and so their culture is naturally the culture of this country. To parent them right, I need to know the culture. Parents who don't learn their kids' culture can't parent. For example, in the U.S., the tv and radio communicate a very permissive, promiscuous culture. If you as a parent don't understand it – say, because you don't speak the language - then you won't know it's there and won't prevent your kids from seeing it. If you don't understand the culture yourself, how can you evaluate it for suitability for your kids?

As to whether Maria ever had conflicts with her children over cultural differences, she responded:

Maria: Yes, for example, Thanksgiving. They wanted to celebrate it, but I wasn't that interested in it. For me, it's just an ordinary day! I had no interest in cooking turkey. But they wanted it. They wanted to be able to talk about it with their

friends, and everybody else was doing it. So I gave in and cooked a turkey. I enjoyed the meal. [*Shrugged her shoulders.*]

Interviewer: Is it ever the other way around?

Maria: Yes, sometimes I expose them to my culture. It is very important to have it go both ways. You can't move here and expect to hold on to the same traditions, beliefs for the next 100 years. You're living here now, and you have to adapt.

This mother reasoned that although parent-child cultural differences were an inevitable part of the immigrant experience, they could be accommodated.

Like Maria, Flor, a 34-year-old elementary school graduate and mother of three children, described a need to change herself to keep up with her children's developing culture. When asked whether such adaptation was difficult, she responded, "Well, it is not difficult because everything changes. So, I tell myself, 'I lived in different times,' right? 'And they live in these times, and perhaps the youngest of our girls will live in yet other times,' I tell myself. So one has to assimilate all these changes." Flor interprets the cultural differences as due to a combination of "changing times" and of her children growing up in a different society. As the cases of Liliana, Maria, and Flor illustrate, to the extent that parents perceived cultural differences between them and their children, they did not view them as inexplicable or problematic. Rather, they viewed them as reasonably explained by the immigration process and/or generational differences and they viewed the differences as manageable and/or mutable through various forms of accommodation.

With regard to children's perceptions of parent-child cultural differences, language was a salient area. A majority (N = 26) of children shared the sentiments of Flor's child Natalie, aged 15 years, who viewed having immigrant parents as a positive. Referring to her family, Natalie

said, “We don’t have one culture; we have two! My American friends can speak one language, but I can speak two! And that makes me feel more...complete!” The remaining four youths cited neither advantages nor disadvantages of having immigrant parents; two expressed a liking of Spanish, including their fluency in it. Eight children in the sample expressed concerns about their parents’ command of English. Jose, 16 years old, said that an advantage of having immigrant parents was their ability to get jobs in the U.S., but a disadvantage was their limited English. He disliked that he occasionally had to translate for them, which he found difficult. Notably, he himself speaks fluent English and Spanish and even said he planned to speak Spanish with his own children. Thus, although Jose and his parents had different commands of English, they shared a command and valuation of Spanish. Mariana, age 19, also expressed language concerns:

The only bad thing [*about having immigrant parents*] is probably that they don’t speak English. My mom, she was born over there [*Mexico*], and she can’t speak English very, very well. She speaks that you can understand her, but she can’t write it. Sometimes it is frustrating. [*For example*], emails! I set up her email account and I showed her how to get into it...and every night she calls me and she says, “I can’t get to my email. Help me!” And I’m like, “Mom, don’t you tell me you can’t get into your email. Just go to the little butterfly on your desk and click on it and click on your name.” And, she goes, “Noooo! It’s not coming out.” “Mom! Don’t start!” [*laughing*] And she got mad at me ‘cause I couldn’t help her. So, she gets frustrated, I get frustrated....

Mariana equates her mother’s poor English with her lack of computer proficiency. Thus, the perceived parent-child difference may be experiential or generational rather than cultural.

Parent-child relationship quality

Parents and children alike expressed feelings of warmth and closeness in their relationship, despite the existence of some tensions. Both indicated that they spend much time together. The comments by Arcelia, a 37-year-old high school graduate and mother of three, who had been in the U.S. for 11 years, exemplify those of many parents: “We’re always together! All five of us. We always spend time together. We go to the store. We go to the park. Wherever...we go all five of us.” Family unity was also evident in the children’s interviews. Maria’s son John described his family as “loving and close. In other words, always together.” Gerarda, 16-year-old daughter of 35-year-old, college graduate Rebeca who has been in the United States for two years, described her family as “close,” saying, “We all like to spend time together.”

Parents and children described the importance of family communication. Gerarda said of her family, “We always have a topic to discuss, and we all discuss it together, and we all give our opinions and points of view.” Angela, a 33-year-old, divorced mother of two, who has an associate’s degree and came to the United States 15 years ago, reflected on how well she thought she was doing as a mother: “I feel satisfied when I see my daughter come to me to ask me something. Then I answer as honestly as I can. So I am satisfied because I know that she has confidence in me.” Angela’s 13-year-old daughter, Estrella, corroborated her mother’s description of their relationship. When asked to whom she goes to for advice, Estrella said, her mother. In fact, all but one adolescent said that they go to their parents when they need advice or help. In most cases, a parent was the first person the adolescent would go to. In a few cases, a parent was listed among several options, including friends, teachers, other relatives, and books, and might be turned to for some topics but not others. Either way, the youths spoke positively about their parents as resources for support and information. The one adolescent who did not list his parent said that he goes to his grandparents because his parent has to work.

We asked parents how they thought they were doing as parents, and they typically responded by describing their children, the implication being that if their child was doing well, then they must be doing a good job as parents. More than revealing how these parents viewed themselves, their answers revealed how the parents viewed their children. As Arcelia's comments about her daughters illustrate, parents expressed satisfaction and pride.

The oldest, she comes home and locks herself away to do homework. Her grades!

It gives one satisfaction when she gets good grades, when the girls see, that one takes an interest! There are different things that I see in my girls. I see that they are not possessed with things. If they have three pairs of tennis shoes, and they see a person that has none, they wouldn't complain about giving them away. I am very at ease with my girls. If I say for them to do their homework, they do it.

These positive evaluations were given even in cases where the parents had concerns about the influence of American culture. Despite the perception of significant risks facing their children, parents in these cases gave no indication that their fears were being realized in their children.

Children also gave positive evaluations of their parents. Describing his family, 17-year-old Daniel, hints at his view of his parents: "We are a family that likes to share many things. For example, we like to go to church together! We like to sit down and eat together and to share our joys and sadnesses with each other." Speaking specifically about her parents, 14-year-old Paula was similarly positive: "They talk with you and they listen to all the problems you have. They help you. They respect you, and they give you what you want. Not everything, but yeah, they give it to you. And they give you much affection, much love!"

The children spoke positively of their parents' immigrant status, describing how it benefitted them. Echoing Natalie's comments on the advantages of immigrant parents is Leticia,

age 15: “You’re bilingual and you get to speak both English and Spanish. You get to learn new traditions and do new stuff.” Karen, a 15-year-old who had come to the U.S. at age 5, was the most enthusiastic of her peers about growing up with two cultures due to having immigrant parents. She reported that she spoke Spanish most frequently because she was “fascinated” with it, despite mostly having American friends. Karen said that she took “advantage of any opportunity to speak Spanish.” She loved it when school personnel asked her to translate for someone in school: “It is a great satisfaction for me being able to translate what they are saying.”

Both parents and children mentioned occasional tensions between them. We asked children whether they had any disagreements or conflicts with their parents. Seventeen children described disagreements with their parents. In all cases but one involving a girl who wished to return to Mexico, the source of conflict was disagreement about rules applied to the child by the parent. Despite wishing for more freedom from their parents, the children expressed an acceptance of their parents’ practices. Rogelio, age 17 and living in the U.S. for ten years, said, “Sometimes I want to go out and they don’t let me. And I tell them...well... I tell them that I want to go out with my friends.... But they don’t want me to go out. ‘Why?’ [*he asks his parents*]. And ‘No, you cannot go out.’ [*So he responds,*] ‘Okay.’ And that’s it. There must be a reason why they don’t let me go.” David, age 17 and living in the United States for six years, is similarly accepting: “I think that my parents are very strict. For example, when my girlfriend and I go out to the movies or to eat, we always have to have a time by which we have to be home, and I would like to stay out later. But these are the rules of the house and I have to follow them.”

Other children justified their parents’ rules. Andrea, age 15 and living in the U.S. for four years, viewed her parents’ rules as “right...because that way, it helps control the kid. Otherwise you wouldn’t have control. Who knows what she or he would be doing!? Sometimes I just think

she [*her mom*] is not [*doing a good job as a parent*]...because I don't like what she is telling me, but I know it's right, even though I don't like it!" Naomi, aged 13, came to the U. S. only two years prior to the interview, said she wouldn't change any of her parents' rules: "They're fine. They're fine because they are good for me. They teach me manners. If I didn't have rules, like the one about cleaning up my clothes, the house would be a pigsty." Notably, Naomi was the only child who reported a conflict with her parents about something other than rules: specifically, their choice to move to and remain in the United States. Naomi's parents' concern about her adaptation problems motivated them to participate in the study. Naomi found American society, more than her parents, to be too strict, citing as examples the requirements to wear seatbelts in the car and speak English and conform to the dress code at school. She also expressed that she wished that she spoke better English, particularly given that she attended a school in which, she estimated, 60% of the students were "Americans," not Latinos or Mexicans.

Several children understood their parents' rules to be protections from hardship associated with immigrant status. Brian said: "My dad's strict. That's what I've noticed. When I go to my friends' house, their parents are less strict. I think that's because he doesn't want me to get in trouble 'cause we're immigrants. I think if I get in trouble with the law, then it'll be a lot bigger 'cause we're immigrants." Thus, while these youths might dislike their parents' rules, they accepted them because they reflected their parents' good intentions.

Three youths explained their conflicts with parents in generational terms. Gisela, age 13 and born in the U.S., discussed differences between her and her parents: "I live in the newer generation. I'm all into the technology and stuff. They're not really so interested in that. 'Cause I'm a kid, I see things differently. My mom thinks, if she tells me to clean my room, I'll be like, 'Yeah, I'll do it in a minute,' but my mom thinks it's 'cause she wants me to mind her because

she cares. But to me she's being kind of annoying. How we're different is because I'm a kid and she's an adult." Gisela views the difference as generational and inevitable but not cultural.

We asked the children how they would parent if they were ever to become parents – for example, would they impose on their children the same rules that their parents imposed on them? Although 11 children spoke of minor changes they might make (e.g., they'd be "slightly less strict" or set an hour-later curfew), all children said they would follow in their parents' footsteps, parenting their children as their parents had parented them. Thus, the children endorsed their parents' approach to parenting, suggesting not only a high degree of concordance between parents and children but also a view of parent-child differences as unproblematic.

Parents (N = 17) also described tensions associated with their children's push for independence. Natalia, high school graduate and mother of four, married and in the United States for seven years at the time of interview, described her children generally, and her daughter specifically: "Thank God I haven't had any problems with them! Yes, there was a time when...yes. The oldest! When they enter adolescence, it's a little difficult! Already with the boyfriend and all. [*Laughs.*] Yes, but thank God, she came out of it. She already graduated from high school and is about to enter college. She wants to be a teacher." Angela said: "[*The kids*] think that they can go anywhere without getting parents' permission when it is totally the opposite. So I have to explain to them that they can't do what they need to until they are old enough. Then, you make your own decisions. But in the meantime you are in my care." One parent, Maritza, age 43, divorced, with an associate's degree, and in the U.S. for seven years, experienced her only child's push for independence as significant enough a challenge to motivate her to seek professional counseling.

It's costing me a lot of work managing an adolescent. I have to resort to professional help. I have tried to be her friend, but at the same time, I have to have control and be a bit firm. Right now, we're having some problems. Unfortunately, at her age, what I give her is fundamental, but whatever I say to her, she disagrees because she is seeing other things through her friends. And, for her, who matters most? Her friends. What they say is the truth. What I say is not the truth.

Whatever the actual explanation for the conflicts may be, Natalia, Angela, and Maritza viewed them as related to adolescent development and the attendant desire for freedom from parental authority, not as related to acculturation differences.

Discussion

This study of acculturation differences between Mexican immigrant parents and their children found both parent-child differences and similarities, regardless of the family's time in the U.S. Children affiliated with American culture more than their parents did and affiliated with Mexican culture deliberately whereas their parents did so automatically. Parents and children shared familiarity with and affinity for Mexican culture, leading some parents and children to perceive no cultural difference between them. Some parents and children viewed differences between them as generational or the result of changing times, rather than as cultural. Consistent with Bacallao and Smokowski (2007)'s work with Mexican immigrant families, other participants viewed their family's cultural diversity as an asset. A majority of parents and children viewed the differences as a normal, inevitable result of the parents' migration.

Where differences were felt by the parents or children, they were fluid and changing. Parents were attentive to their children's cultural development, many aiming to keep up with their children's acquisition of American culture by modifying family traditions and practices to

accommodate American culture, while also continuing to practice and impart Mexican culture. These efforts aimed to keep the cultural distance between parents and children to a minimum and to honor both cultures. Thus, rather than finding families on a trajectory of increasing cultural differences or distancing (Hwang, 2006), we found families to be on a trajectory towards decreasing separation, as parents and children worked to develop a shared family culture.

The perception of little or no parent-child acculturation differences does not mean that no such differences existed. While most parents and adolescents conflict over issues of autonomy, acculturative processes may make these issues a more common source of tension in immigrant families (Coatsworth, Pantin, & Szapocznik, 2002). Also, notions of autonomy vary by culture; relative to mainstream American culture, Latino cultures typically afford greater authority to parents and define maturity as achieved at later ages (Marín, 1993). Thus, while the adolescent push for independence may appear usual and unrelated to immigration, acculturation may be operating. Parents' understanding of conflicts as related to development, rather than acculturation, even if not true, may be protective in that contributes to a greater sense of manageability. Since adolescence is time limited, parents and children may be more committed to facing the challenges associated with their differences, knowing that they won't last forever.

Had we applied the definition of acculturation gap used in prior studies, we would conclude that the identified differences constitute an acculturation gap. However, "acculturation gap" is an inappropriate characterization of the cultural makeup of the families we studied, as the differences were not generally great. If we were to plot parents and children on the two acculturation continua – Mexican culture and American culture, we'd see that differences were most common on the American continuum and nearly nonexistent on the Mexican continuum. Together, they would reveal substantial cultural overlap, rather than a parent-child gap. This

overlap may be due to effective cultural transmission as the parents had a strong sense of how to transmit the important elements of Mexican culture to their offspring. Some families' high degree of interaction with extended family may also reinforce parents' cultural transmission.

With regard to parent-child relationship quality, we found high levels of parent-child closeness and family unity, reported by both parents and children. Although some tensions existed, parent-child relationships were not fraught with conflict or poor communication. Where there were conflicts, they were about rules imposed by the parents on the children. Children wanted more independence than their parents were giving them, but they also accepted their parents' rules, often describing them as beneficial and necessary or, at least, well intentioned. The conflict was neither perceived as indicative of acculturation differences nor associated with family dysfunction or undesirable child outcomes. Thus, we found no evidence that the sample's parent-child acculturation differences were associated with parent-child relationship problems.

Two differences between our study and many previous studies on parent-child acculturation differences involve our operationalization of acculturation differences. First, we examined acculturation as the bidimensional construct it is conceptualized to be (Berry, 1997), assessing parent-child differences on both the Mexican cultural and American cultural continua, rather than a single continuum ranging from Mexican to American. There were two chances (one on each continuum), rather than just one, for finding parent-child differences. With this conservative approach we would expect to find more differences, not fewer. Yet, we found fewer parent-child differences than are typically reported in research on this topic.

Second, whereas prior research treated any parent-child difference as an acculturation gap, we defined gap as a wide difference – i.e., no overlap. Our data's richness enabled us to find actual differences that were not perceived by parents or children as differences – often, because

the differences were not large. Had most parents or children perceived there to be differences or, for that matter, large differences, we may have found more of the problems found previously to be associated with parent-child acculturation differences. The high tolerance of difference, or alternatively put, parents and/or children's framing of characteristics as shared rather than not shared, may be a source of resilience in Mexican immigrant families.

Where acculturation differences existed, they were also not viewed as fixed. Had parents or children viewed their differences as unchanging, or worse, widening, we may have found more evidence of negative consequences. In fact, Hwang's (2006) distancing theory acknowledges while many immigrant families may have acculturative differences, not all of them develop problems. Thus, it may be that persistent differences and/or widening differences, rather than all differences, are problematic. Furthermore, the view of acculturation differences as malleable may highlight a source of resilience in Mexican immigrant families.

An alternative interpretation is that the relationship between parent-child acculturation differences and negative youth outcomes may not exist in Mexican immigrant families (Lau et al., 2005). While the present study does not invalidate prior research on the effects of acculturation differences in immigrant families, it highlights the need for future research to unpack the differences or "gaps" that prior studies have found to be associated with problematic youth outcomes and to test whether these relationships found most commonly in other ethnic groups also exist in Mexican American families.

Researchers should more finely assess acculturation differences between parents and children, locating and quantifying the differences on the two acculturation continua, and take into account parents and children's perceptions of differences. The consequences of parent-child acculturation differences, as identified in prior research, may be related to these factors, rather

than solely to the existence of a difference. Rather than asking, “Is there an acculturation gap?” we should ask, “Are there differences in Mexican culture? American culture?” and “According to whom?” Also, scholars should reserve use of the term “acculturation gap” for instances in which an actual gap exists. The term does not accurately characterize the parent-child relationships in this sample, even in cases where differences existed and were acknowledged by the family. Its negative connotation supports a false depiction of Mexican family life in the United States as “deficient and incapable of providing children with the necessary environment to promote successful adjustment to the larger society” (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994, p. 56). Focusing on “gaps” may lead to intervention where no problem exists. Focusing on reducing parent-child differences without acknowledging parent-child acculturation overlaps may overlook naturally occurring family strengths. We propose replacing the “acculturation gap” framework with a new conceptual framework for understanding parent-child acculturation. The new framework adds to the existing bidimensional concept of acculturation the concept of “cultural overlap,” is more accurate for characterizing families, and facilitates research on the multiple, different parent-child acculturation composites and their effects.

The sample may over-include families with highly concordant acculturation levels or relatively problem-free relationships. Because the study was advertised to be about the transmission of culture across generations and the challenges of immigrant parenthood, there was a chance of attracting “successful” parents who could tell us what works as well as “unsuccessful” parents who were themselves seeking to learn what works. However, some parents might have not participated due to feeling ashamed of their challenges or attributing stigma to involvement in research. In the minority of sample families in which multiple children were eligible, parents may have nominated for participation a child with few problems, with

whom they had a better relationship, or who was more similar to them culturally. That said, the interviews covered not only the specific parent-child relationship but also other family relationships. In families with multiple eligible children, the parents and children did not report major differences between the children in relations with the parents.

The high degree of bilingual competence among the sample children might explain why so few problems with parents were identified. A loss of Spanish competence, even among the first generation (Kenji & D'Andrea, 1992) has been associated with greater risk (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). This sample's high bilingualism may translate to better communication skills and fewer conflicts over acculturation differences. This sample's high degree of optimism and flexibility – adaptation and change were seen as manageable – may not be representative of all Mexican immigrant families, particularly those with severe stress, financial problems, or mental health issues. Since this sample came from a state bordering Mexico, the results may be different in families that are more isolated from Mexican culture in the U.S.

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