

RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Qualitative Study of Maternal Perceptions of Acculturation Processes at the Onset of Child Schooling

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Immigrant families may experience parent-child differences in acculturation. A critical time in this differential acculturation is the onset of the child's schooling. Building on prior studies of parent-child acculturation processes, this exploratory, qualitative study examined mothers' perspectives on their preschoolers' acculturation and the relationship to their own acculturation. Based on qualitative data collected from six Latino immigrant mothers of preschool-aged children, three acculturation processes emerged that illustrate how mothers perceive their own and their child's acculturation: parallel, vertex, and inter-segmented. One pair was coded as experiencing a parallel acculturation process, defined as mother and child experiencing completely disconnected acculturation processes. Three pairs were coded as experiencing a vertex-like process, which is defined as mother and child starting at the same point and then deviating from each other as the child's acculturation accelerates and the mother's decelerates. Two pairs were identified as inter-segmented, meaning that mother and child acculturation processes converge and separate at various points. Each type may have implications for mother-child interactions and relationship during preschool and subsequent school years when acculturation may impact families further. This study emphasizes the need to understand parents' approaches and expectations as they relate to cultural adaptations, especially at the onset of schooling. We end with recommendations for teachers and administrators in preschool settings to improve their understanding of acculturation and their relationships with immigrant families.

Keywords: acculturation, maternal perceptions, preschool, Latino, children

In the first decade of the 21st century, the population of the United States increased by 10%. Compare this with the 43% growth explosion of the Latino population in the U.S. (Ennis, Rios-Vargas, & Albert, 2011). This large portion of the U.S. population is young. One in five people under the age of 18 are Latino (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Much of this growth is due to the number of children born to Latino immigrants (Hernandez, 2004). Thus, issues of education are important when considering the Latino population. There is mounting evidence that Latino

children are struggling academically (Gandara & Contreras, 2009). Researchers are pinpointing differences at the onset of schooling and primary grades to explain later educational gaps (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 2002). The preschool years may well be the best opportunity to give children of Latino immigrants a chance at academic success. Researchers and practitioners must, then, be particularly attuned to the cultural and social experiences and expectations of the immigrant family at the onset of schooling.

In this study, we examined immigrant Latino mothers' approaches to and perceptions of their child's acculturation at the onset of the child's schooling. Acculturation, or cultural assimilation, is balanced with ethnic preservation; together these two concepts embody the extent to which an immigrant embraces or rejects U.S. culture (Moon, Kang, & An, 2009). We acknowledge that fathers are an integral part of the parenting and family unit (Ortiz, 2004; Rodriguez, Davis, Rodriguez, & Bates, 2006). This study explored the preschooler's acculturation process through the eyes of his mother—his primary caretaker in these cases.

The process of acculturation is a very personal one that is influenced by both an individual's experience with members of his own group and those in the host society as well as by such outside forces as discrimination and marginalization. These internal and external acculturation processes often differ between parent and child for several reasons. First, children tend to integrate at a faster rate and with less stress than the parent (Padilla, Alvarez, & Lindholm, 1986; Rumbaut, 2004; Alba & Nee, 2003). Children also have more opportunities to practice, acquire, and experiment with U.S. cultural values, behaviors and the use of English, which is often a marker of acculturation, because of their interactions within a school setting. On the other hand, immigrant parents may live within a cultural enclave that fosters the use of the native tongue and promotes traditional values not found in U.S. society (Gonzalez, Yawkey, & Minaya-Rowe, 2006). Second, the child's experience with discrimination may differ dramatically from his or her parents. At times, the child may not be aware that he or she is being discriminated against. In contrast, an adult or parent may be able to decipher others' behaviors as discriminatory. The immigrant adult may also experience more encounters, such as shopping and interacting with communities, where discrimination is more likely to occur. Commitment is the third reason adult and child acculturation processes differ. The U.S.-born child of immigrants and the young immigrant child experience less of a connection to their country of origin primarily because of limited experiences in the homeland (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995). Differing acculturative styles may create friction within the family; then again, if a parent and child have differing acculturation processes, they may complement each other.

Based on segmented assimilation theory (Portes & Zhou, 1993), Portes and Rumbaut's (2001) typology of acculturation across generations is the prevailing model on immigrant parent-child experiences. They examine different degrees of acculturation between parent and child and hypothesize how these differences affect children's outcomes in three scenarios: dissonant, consonant, and selective acculturation. Their model focuses on acceptance of U.S. customs and the English language and insertion into the ethnic community. In their model, parent-child differences in acculturation are indicative of dissonant acculturation and can lead to poor academic and social outcomes for the child. Parent-child similarities in acculturation can mean complete assimilation into mainstream U.S. culture (consonant acculturation) or selective acculturation, which occurs when parent and child embrace the customs and language of their host country but still cling to the beneficial aspects of their native culture. Both consonant and selective acculturations portend favorable academic and social outcomes for the child. Other

researchers have conducted empirical studies that give positive evidence for Portes and Rumbaut's typology of acculturation across generations (see Foner & Dreby, 2011 for a review).

Many of the studies on the positive effects of selective acculturation on children's social and academic outcomes (Bankston & Zhou., 1995; A. Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Romero, Robinson, Haydel, Mendoza, & Killen, 2004) focus on junior high school and high school (For example Xiong, Eliason, Detzner, & Cleveland, 2005; Martinez, DeGarmo, & Eddy, 2004). A few empirical studies look at elementary school-age children (Crosnoe & Kalil, 2010; Iannacci, 2008; Romero, Robinson, Haydel, Mendoza, & Killen, 2004; Weisskirch & Alva, 2002). Yet it is equally important to explore the acculturation processes of young children at the preschool or kindergarten levels. This time period is crucial because it often marks the beginning of the child's immersion in U.S. culture.

Spindler (1974) proposes that cultural discontinuities between the second-generation immigrant child and U.S. culture occur primarily with the onset of schooling, and empirical research suggests this is true for Latino children from Mexico (Trueba, 1993) and Central America (Rothstein-Fisch, Trumbull & Garcia 2009). Similarly, cultural discontinuities develop in an immigrant family as the child begins to negotiate new practices adopted from the host society and those valued in her home. Such discontinuities also result when the immigrant parent expresses disapproval of the child's adoption of mainstream behaviors. Therefore, researchers argue that differing acculturation processes exist within the Latino immigrant parent-child dyad and are most observable with the onset of child schooling, as illustrated by Cortez (2008) in his study of Latinos and Rothstein-Fisch, Trumbull and Garcia (2009) who focused on parents and children from Mexico and Central America.

Recent immigrants tend to stress the moral development of their preschool-age children over academic skills (Farver, Xu, Eppe, & Lonigan, 2006; Gallimore & Goldenberg, 2001; Halgunseth, Ispa, & Rudy, 2006) and are disappointed that teachers seem preoccupied with literacy and numeracy (Reese, 2001). There is also a tension between the collectivist culture of Latino families and the individualism prized in the U.S. educational system (Rothstein-Fisch, Trumbull & Garcia 2009). Immigrant Latino parents from various countries (e.g., Mexico Central America, and the U.S.) do not see their values reflected in early childhood classrooms (Souto-Manning, 2009), although some teachers are striving to understand and incorporate them into their interactions with immigrant families (For example Trumbull, 2005).

Along with cultural discontinuities, the onset of schooling often brings immigrant children's language into question. Differences in home and school language, along with differences in culture, become apparent at the onset of schooling (Cortez, 2008). Children's linguistic and literacy outcomes depend on the language of instruction at school, language exposure at home, and language use within the community (Dickinson & Tabors, 2002). Studies show that immigrant Latino parents are eager to have their preschoolers learn English and retain Spanish (Reese, Goldenberg, & Saunders, 2006; Worthy, 2006; Worthy & Rodríguez-Galindo, 2006). In an in-depth qualitative study, Worthy and Rodríguez-Galindo (2006) found that when parents are proactive about promoting bilingualism, children become fluent in written and spoken English and Spanish. Bilingualism is associated with positive family relations and personality outcomes (Portes & Hao, 2002), in addition to being academically advantageous (Bankston & Zhou, 1995; Lindholm & Aclan, 1991).

The onset of a child's schooling is an interesting time because changes in the child's environment may bring maternal perspectives about acculturation into question, especially as it relates to their own and their child's process. Using in-depth interviews with six immigrant

women, we examined the acculturation to U.S. society and the retention of native culture in women whose children are in preschool. As noted above, the existing literature focuses mainly on the social, academic, and linguistic outcomes of children, with less focus on how parents feel and perceive the process of acculturation in its early stages. This study aims to address this gap in the literature by answering the following research question: What are Latina immigrant mothers' perceptions of their preschooler's acculturation process and how does it relate to their own acculturation process?

METHOD

Design

This study focused on a convenience sample of six Latina immigrant mothers, and it explored their perceptions of their preschooler's acculturation within the context of their own acculturation process. The study was conducted in a community education center that offered education services to both parent and their preschool child. In-depth semi-structured interviews were used to gather information regarding their preschooler's experiences in school and learning English as well as mothers' perceptions regarding their child's English acquisition and acculturation process. Demographic information about the respondent and her child was also collected. Qualitative data analysis methods were implemented, and frequencies and means were reported based on demographic data collected.

Setting

Participants were recruited from a Healthy Start Support Services for Children Act (Healthy Start Initiative) program at a community center within an elementary school located in the city of Cudahy, a predominantly Latino immigrant community in Southern California. The Healthy Start Initiative provides comprehensive community-based services through education agencies, including schools, and offers a number of services, including English as a Second Language (ESL) classes for adults, child care/preschool for children, parent education courses, vocational adult education courses and access to health education offered. This site was selected because it offers services to immigrant parents and their children and provides volunteer opportunities to parents of children enrolled in the program without prescribing the number of volunteer hours or types of activities required of volunteers. At the time of the study, there were ten volunteer mothers in the program.

Procedure

To establish trust with the ten mothers who were volunteering in their child's program held at the study site, classroom teachers gave the lead author permission to participate in the daily classroom activities. All the parents in the preschool program consented to the author's participation. During daily activities, group conversations often spontaneously formed during the children's "outside" play. The topics of discussion varied from children's emotional needs to

mother's perception of their preschooler's school performance. At times, parents informally compared their children with one another. Fathers were not present during these conversations and interactions because they worked during regular school hours when mothers volunteered to help in the classroom. In many cases, fathers worked more than one job at a time and were not able to participate in their children's preschool experience. The author did not conduct any formal or informal interviews or assessment during the spontaneous conversations. At the end of the eight-week period, mothers were invited to participate in an in-depth interview via an oral presentation about the study. Six of the 10 mothers agreed to participate.

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with each participant. Interviews were conducted by the lead author and a research assistant familiar with the objective of the study. An in-depth interview was selected because it allows participants to give open-ended answers and provide rich information on the subject matter and on related issues. Interviews were conducted in participant homes or at the school site, depending on the parent's preference. Four of the six interviews took place in the respondents' homes, while the other two took place at the school site. Interviews lasted 45 minutes on average. All interviews were conducted in Spanish, and fathers were not present for the interview. In five of the six interviews, the preschool child was present. Interviews were audio recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. To compensate them for their time, children received a gift as a token of appreciation, and mothers received a modest monetary gift.

Participants

The mean age among the six participants was 29.33 years ($SD=4.14$). All mothers were eligible for Healthy Start services, which target low-income families. Four of the six women reported family income ranging from \$10,000 to \$15,000, one reported family income ranging from \$20,000 to \$25,000 and one reported family income ranging from \$25,000 to \$30,000. The mean family size was 4.5 ($SD=1.23$), with a mean of 3.00 children ($SD=.89$), with ages ranging from 2 to 11. The mean target child age was 48.50 months ($SD=22.89$). All the participants were immigrants from Latin American countries. One respondent emigrated from Honduras, while the other five emigrated from Mexico. The mean number of years in the United States was 7.8 ($SD=3.74$). Three mothers reported that Spanish was their child's primary language, one reported English and two reported that their child spoke both English and Spanish. All mothers said they used Spanish to speak to their child. In addition, five said Spanish was the primary home language and one said she considered her home to be bilingual.

Five of the participants live in the city of Cudahy, California. The sixth participant lives in a predominately Latino immigrant community two miles northwest of Cudahy in the city of South Gate, California. All the respondents live with their spouse and children. Two families have extended family members residing in their home.

Measure

Interview questions were based on the cited literature and the research questions listed above. Three areas of inquiry guided the interview: language use (e.g., English and Spanish) by the participant and her preschool child; cultural values; and participants' perspective on their

preschooler's acculturation process (e.g., adoption of American values) and their own behaviors (e.g., English use). Demographic information was also collected. To inquire about language use participants were asked about use of language (e.g., English and Spanish) in the home, who spoke English, whether their child spoke English and how the participant felt about their child's use of English. Regarding cultural values, mothers were asked whether cultural values were discussed in the home, whether her child adhered to cultural practices she valued and how she felt about her child's cultural preferences. We also asked parents about their child's adoption of mainstream practices. For example, one question was, "Have you noticed that your child has American ideas?" To ascertain in more detail about how participants felt about their child's acculturation, we included projective questions. For example, we asked, "How would you feel if your daughter decided to speak only English?"

Data Analysis

Data analyses relied on interview transcripts, which was the unit of analysis, and relied on the interview questions to guide the coding. The coding required that each interviewer read each transcript separately, paying special attention to responses or "mentions" about language use, cultural values, and responses to children's acculturation. Next, using methods recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994), each reader created codes by hand based on responses to identify patterns that emerged from the data and that answered the interview and research questions. Once this step was completed individually, the researchers compared codes to verify accuracy. Using the codes, we grouped similar units or transcripts together. From these empirical groupings, three types of maternal perspectives or approaches to child acculturation emerged. Finally, we identified math symbols (e.g., parallel lines, lines that meet at one point and a helix) to visually illustrate the three different approaches or perspectives: parallel, vertex, and inter-segmented (similar in appearance to a helix). Each of these types of maternal perspectives regarding her preschooler's acculturation and her own are described below and illustrate how based on data collected. Thus, the figures illustrate what we interpret to be the mother and child's acculturation process at the time of the interview and make assumptions based on the cited literature about the trajectory of those patterns.

RESULTS

As shown in Figures 1, 2, and 3, three acculturation processes based on maternal perceptions emerged from the data. The first is referred to as a *parallel acculturation process*, in which the mother's and child's acculturation processes are completed disconnected, as coded in the data. In the second typology, referred to as a *vertex acculturation process*, the mother and child have a common acculturation pathway at the onset, but the commonality is hypothesized to deviate and the two acculturation processes go their own ways. In the third typology, referred to as an *inter-segmented acculturation process*, the acculturation processes of the mother and child meet at various points and depart at others. Based on our analysis, one mother fit the *parallel acculturation process*, three mothers fell into the *vertex acculturation process*, and the remaining two mothers fit into the *inter-segmented acculturation process*. We discuss each below. We used

pseudonyms for all the mothers and children. Table 1 provides a summary of key characteristics for each of the three dyads.

Figure 1. Illustration of a parallel dyad

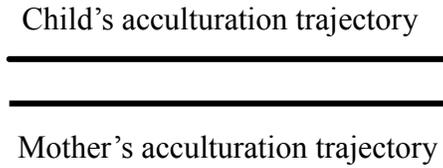


Figure 2. Illustration of the proposed vertex dyad

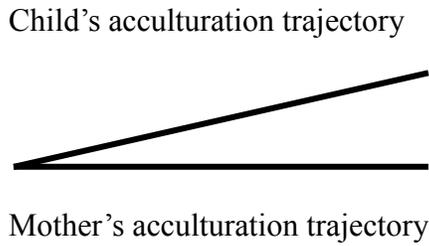


Figure 3. Illustration of the proposed inter-segmented dyad

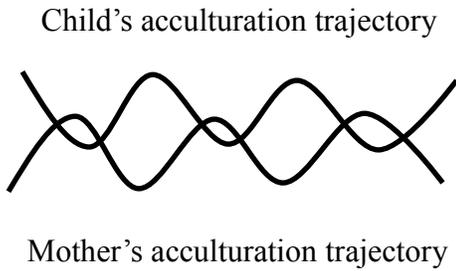


TABLE 1
Mother-Child Acculturation Typologies

Type of Dyadic Acculturation	Years in US	Participation in US Institutions	Language Use
Parallel	6.0 years	Some	Mrs. Moran: "I don't like him [her son] speaking English at home."
Vertex	6.3 years	Extensive	Ms. Herrera: "I tell her [her daughter], 'I taught you how to add; now you have to teach me English.'"
Inter-segmented	11.5 years	Extensive	Mrs. Castro: "I think we can acquire other ways of speaking and not necessarily lose our culture just because we speak English."

Parallel acculturation process

This first dyad is characterized by conflicting patterns of acculturation between parent and child. The parent resists integrating into the host society and similarly discourages her child from acculturating and incorporating new behaviors into the family cultural schema. Although the mother may have adopted some of the host society's practices, such as learning English, she still insists that the child not participate in mainstream behaviors in her presence or in the home, such as using English in the home.

In the one case that fit this pattern, the mother emigrated from Mexico with her husband six years ago. Mrs. Moran has an eleventh-grade education from Mexico. Since her arrival, she has resided in the city of Cudahy, CA with her spouse and children. Mrs. Moran attended ESL courses for two years prior to taking a position as a volunteer childcare provider at the study site. According to Mrs. Moran, she can read, write, and speak English "*un poco*" (a bit), but does not practice speaking it. When asked if she could speak English, she responded by saying, "*Yo, pues, yo tengo mucho vocabulario pero no, no, lo hablo nada*" (I, well, I have a large vocabulary, but no, no, I don't ever speak it). When asked about her child's use of English, her response resonates with her own practices. Mrs. Moran's response to the question "Has he (the child) begun to speak English to you?" was "*Palabras...a mí no me gusta que hable inglés aquí en la casa...Yo le digo 'que lo quiera platicar allá con sus amiguitos...aquí en la casa no.'*" (Some words...I don't like him speaking English at home...I tell him 'talk about whatever you want over there with your friends...not at home.). The child, however, felt differently. When Mrs. Moran said, "*Aquí nadie hablamos inglés,*" (Here [at home] no one speaks English), the target child, Arturo, immediately responded, "*¡Yo sí!*" (I do!).

With regard to discussions about cultural values, Mrs. Moran does not discuss them with her son. However, when asked about her son's adoption of U.S. cultural practices, she referenced his eating habits. According to Mrs. Moran, Arturo prefers hamburgers, hot dogs, and pizza to chicken soup and tortillas. When asked about her reaction to this, she said it bothers her, but

primarily because American food does not provide the same nutritional values as her homemade chicken soup. When asked about the importance she places on her child's interactions with members from other ethnic/racial groups, Mrs. Moran said she places "little importance" on it.

Vertex acculturation process

The second acculturation process observed in the data is characterized by a parent who enthusiastically experiences her acculturation process by attending ESL classes. The acculturation process is a shared experience between the parent and child, with one teaching the other different behaviors from the mainstream society. Still, this parent may not immerse herself in the host society as much as the child may, drawing limits on the number of mainstream behaviors she adopts; however, she does support her child's acculturation. This is translated into a mother and child who start at the same point in the acculturation process, but divert at some point and go off into their own patterns.

Three of the mothers we interviewed fit this pattern. The mean number of years these respondents have been in the United States is 6.3 years. The mean level of education is 7.3 years, all of which was in their country of origin (Mexico and Honduras). Two of the respondents did not consider themselves able to speak, read, or write English, while the third said she could read, write, and speak English "a little." All have attended ESL classes and participated in courses, such as basic computer instruction and child development. Among the three mothers who fit into the vertex dyad, two have the most experience with U.S. schools: Mrs. Castro has volunteered for six years and Mrs. Ramirez has been a volunteer for three years in her daughter's school. The children of all three mothers have attended school only in the United States. All three mothers said that their children speak English in the home. Although they did not consider themselves equipped to teach their children English, they promoted the use of English by encouraging their children to teach them and by teaching them the little English they do know.

Mrs. Gutierrez, an immigrant from Honduras, a mother of a two-year-old preschool toddler, shared examples of teaching her son simple English commands and then modeling the appropriate behavior. "*Le digo, 'Give me a kiss' y el no más se reí y yo le enseño que me dé un beso.*" (I tell him, 'Give me a kiss' and he just laughs then I gesture to him to give me a kiss.) Although these mothers encourage and promote the use of English, they do not feel they will acquire English proficiency themselves.

Characteristic of the vertex dyadic mother is an overt value placed on bilingualism. Regardless of their English proficiency, vertex dyadic mothers all promoted the use of English and Spanish in the home. When asked how they address the issue of bilingualism, respondents said that they rely on their children to help them learn English so they can understand what their child is saying and are not kept out of the loop. The child's acculturation is much faster than that of the parent, and it is expected that the vertex dyadic child will eventually leave her parent behind; however, this common acculturation process established early on may provide for a sound foundation.

The vertex dyadic mothers in this study indicated that discussions about ethnicity were limited, but they said they used the importance of the family and tradition as a means of limiting the child's adoption of U.S. cultural values. These mothers acknowledge the importance of acquiring the English language but noted that it was important not to lose sight of the value of

maintaining Spanish. Although the vertex dyadic mother and her child do not explicitly discuss ethnicity, bilingualism serves as the bridge missing from the parallel dyad.

Inter-segmented acculturation process

The inter-segmented acculturation process is characterized by the parent-child sharing acculturation processes at different points in the adaptation. The immigrant parent and her child exchange values acquired as a result of contact with the host society. Moreover, the mother and child in the inter-segmented dyad share a mutual respect for their native culture. This is most evident in the inter-segmented mothers' own acculturation processes. This mother attends ESL classes and becomes a part of certain mainstream institutions, but she holds on to such native cultural values as collectivism and traditional foods. Still, while she is involved in her own acculturation process, this parent monitors her child to make sure the child does not reject traditional values but instead complements those values with new behaviors gained from the host society; she makes sure that her child is always in touch with her cultural heritage.

In the inter-segmented mother and child process, conversations about ethnic pride and prejudice are commonplace. The inter-segmented dyadic mother makes explicit the importance of maintaining one's ethnic ties while incorporating behaviors of the host society. She ensures the native culture stays alive by teaching her child ethnic values. For example, one mother said:

“En mi familia yo [les] estoy enseñándoles sus valores...Yo pienso que las formas de hablar [las idioma] puede uno conseguirla y no necesariamente uno va dejar su cultura por hablar el Inglés. Yo creo que si [tendrán tradiciones Mexicanas cuando estén grandes] porque los valores agarran desde chiquitos, y creo que con la cultura que crezcan cambiaran cualquier cosita, pero no creo que cambien toda [las tradiciones].”
(In my family I'm teaching them values...I think we can acquire other ways of speaking [other languages] and not lose our culture because we speak English. I think they will [have Mexican traditions when they are older] because the values they gain begin when they are small, and I think that there will be small changes to the culture they grow up with, but they will be small changes.)

Mrs. Silva (above) clearly states her belief that cultural values are formed early in life and that they are relatively stable over time. Thus, the inter-segmented dyadic mother perceives new behaviors as adding to the existing cultural schema. In addition, she ensures that aspects of the new culture are an integral part of her child's life. *“¿Y usted como se sintiera si ellos tuvieran más valores Americanas que Mexicanos?”* (How would you feel if they [the children] adopted more American than Mexican ideals?), asked the interviewer. *“Pues yo sé que están en su país.”* (Well, I know they're in their country.) Mrs. Silva responds with a sense of security and acceptance.

In our sample, Mrs. Vera and Mrs. Silva, the two mothers in this dyad, had the highest number of years in the United States—9 and 14 years, respectively. Each of the inter-segmented dyadic mothers has engaged in formal English learning programs. The inter-segmented dyadic mother is enthusiastic and involved in her own development, as evidenced by her participation in various school-oriented activities. In both cases, respondents explicitly stated their plans for acquiring a vocational or bachelor's degree. For example, Mrs. Silva said: *“Yo le dije a mi*

esposo que yo quiero ir al colegio; que quiero ser maestra” (I told my husband that I want to go to college; I want to become a teacher.). In a separate interview with Mrs. Vera, she was asked, “¿Es posible que ellos [su niños] aprendan más inglés que español? (Is it possible that they [your children] will learn more English than Spanish?). Mrs. Vera responded, “*Por eso me voy a preparar...Yo quiero prepararme para cuándo ellos lleguen ya a un ‘college’ para poderles ayudar.*” (That’s why I’m going to prepare...I want to prepare myself so I can help when they attend college.) Moving on to the discussion about acquiring U.S. cultural values, the interviewer asked Mrs. Vera, “¿Ha observado Usted que [su niños] tienen [valores] Americanos?” (Have you observed that your children have American values?). Her response was, “*No, porque como en mi familia yo estoy enseñándoles sus valores... No necesariamente uno va dejar su cultura por hablar en inglés.*” (No, because I’m teaching my family values... One will not necessarily lose one’s culture simply because they speak English.)

Discussion

When it comes to analyzing acculturation—the process by which an individual acquires the culture of a particular country—more and more attention is focusing on the immigrant family. When immigrants come to the United States, many either bring young children with them or have children in the United States. As immigrants and their children negotiate U.S. society and culture, their experiences affect their own acculturation process as well as the acculturation processes of others in their families. While studies have examined acculturation patterns in parents and children (e.g., Portes & Rumbaut, 2001), much of this work has focused on school-aged children with a limited amount of attention given to the families at the onset of schooling (i.e., preschool). To address this gap in the literature, this study answers the following research question: What are Latina immigrant mothers’ perceptions of their preschooler’s acculturation process and how does it relate to their own acculturation process? This study found that, based on in-depth interviews with six Latina immigrant mothers, acculturation processes can vary widely between mother and child and across parents. Three acculturation processes emerged from the data we gathered and defined here using math symbols: parallel, vertex and inter-segmented.

We found that the parallel acculturation process among mother and child is characterized by a mother’s need to maintain Spanish as the only language of the home, regardless of the child’s English proficiency and desire to speak English. It is hypothesized that this kind of dissonance creates much of the conflict in later observations in teen-parent dyads. A child who cannot freely incorporate the new behaviors he adopts (e.g., language, values, practices) into his repertoire will experience cultural discontinuity with his mother and may already be experiencing some level of discontinuity at school. The lack of constant acculturation can have negative consequences for school achievement and self-concept (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

Results from the vertex and inter-segmented processes suggest that the mothers are more closely aligned with their children’s current acculturation. Furthermore, they have a positive outlook on their child’s future acculturation. If this pattern continues, we can expect better academic outcomes for these children. In fact, Portes and Rumbaut (2001) suggest that consonant and selective adaptation are highly correlated with better child outcomes. Further investigation is needed to determine if these patterns are found in other families and how they change over time. If these processes are observed in other families and data is collected to

determine factors that effect change in acculturation trajectories, then further evidence may support the early onset of varying patterns reported by Portes and Rumbaut's (2001). For now, we speculate that the vertex-like mother and child may be able to rely on the early shared experiences to maintain harmony in their home even if the child's acculturation process continues to accelerate.

Still, a number of factors are likely to determine the trajectory of mother and child as it relates to acculturation. For instance, a vertex mother may enter the labor force and find that her English skills require further refining. She may feel compelled to become more acculturated or she may find it difficult to adapt. This mother may lean on her child for support or she may feel isolated in her process. It is clearly impossible to speculate what factors may change in a mother's life and how she responds. To better understand her acculturation process and that of her child, longitudinal studies that begin when the child enters school should be undertaken.

Consequently, a mother's perspective on her child's acculturation process should not be determined by one time point or a current view. Instead, we should consider the mother's own experiences and attitude toward her child's acculturation process as it changes over time. For instance, the parallel defined mother in this study personally experienced racism, which negatively affected her view of the United States and its values. One can argue that this mother may also be suffering from low self-esteem, depression, and isolation that may color her view of U.S. culture. In that same vein, one can argue that as this mother's experiences in the United States improve, so will her attitudes about and toward her child's acculturation process. Additionally, given the linear trajectory of the mean number of years in the United States across the three dyads shown in Table 1, one can argue that the patterns we observe are actually stages of acculturation. In time, one may observe mother and child acculturation processes that more closely resemble the inter-segmented pattern. Similarly, one can hypothesize that the vertex dyad mother, assuming she continues to learn English and selectively adapts U.S. cultural practices, can also become an inter-segmented mother. As noted above, a longitudinal study that starts at the child's onset of schooling and tracks the primary caregiver's acculturation processes and those of her child will provide a more accurate picture.

Limitations

As with any small qualitative investigation, this study has some limitations. First, we acknowledge that a sample size of six limits the generalizability of this study. However, given that, to our knowledge, this is the first study of its kind, our contribution is in bringing forth awareness of processes that are absent from the current literature about acculturation processes among parents and children, primarily young children. Second, this study does not measure children's English language acquisition independent of mother's reports, which may be biased based on the mother's own language acquisition or feeling about English, as illustrated by our parallel mother. The third limitation of this study is that children were not interviewed. However, the aim of the study was to understand parents' perceptions, in this case the mother's, and child acculturation processes as it unfolds within the context of children's formal schooling experience (i.e., preschool). Finally, this study is a snapshot of current acculturation processes that are based on maternal reports, which might be fraught with biases that we did not account for. Still, given the exploratory nature of this study, we believe that in-depth maternal interviews about acculturation processes the mother perceives in herself and her child are the first steps in the

right direction towards a better understanding of acculturation patterns in families with young children.

Implications

The parent-child acculturation process can have implications for the child's social and academic outcomes (Bankston & Zhou., 1995; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Romero, Robinson, Haydel, Mendoza, & Killen, 2004) as well as the parent-child relationship (Crosnoe & Kalil 2010; Ibanez, Kuperminc, Jurkovic, & Perilla, 2004; Weisskirch & Alva, 2002). Prior research has shown a link between adolescent-parent cultural dissonance and family conflict (Costigan & Dokis, 2006). By identifying patterns of acculturation at the parent and child level, we can develop ways to support both parent and child as they negotiate language, culture and values, to reduce conflict and promote success in children's early school experiences and as they progress through the U.S. school system. In reaction to the growing number of Latino children under the age of five, early education programs are making additional investments to address the population's needs. For instance, Head Start programs have made evidence-based changes to serve these children and their families. Head Start staff can continue to recruit bilingual teachers and administrators, and to add to cultural sensitivity training the idea that acculturation differs within a family and is fluid. Every family is different, even if they come from the same sending country or speak the same foreign language (e.g., Spanish). The opportunity for Head Start staff, and others at the preschool and kindergarten levels, is to be attuned to the differences in immigrant parents' levels of acculturation and their unique wishes for their children's acculturation. Teachers and administrators can continue to invest in developing relationships with immigrant families in their programs. When parents feel their viewpoint is respected, they are more likely to collaborate with teachers. Parental involvement in school provides parents and children with shared experiences in the mainstream culture and increases the chances that parents will understand their children's acculturation process. This shared experience is likely to decrease conflict and increase collaboration between families and schools.

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