Immigration Related Family Separation

Background

The Latino population in the United States has been growing for decades. Between 2000 and 2010, the population increased by 70%. In North Carolina, the number of Latinos has doubled to 800,000, or 8.4% of the population (Ennis, Ríos-Vargas, & Albert, 2011). Mexicans, specifically make up the largest group, as 30% of immigrants in the US are Mexican, and 65% in NC have Mexican heritage. Although immigration from Mexico has slowed to a halt, there is a greater need than ever to address the issues faced by immigrants and their families (Passel, Cohn, & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2012; Perreira, Chapman, & Stein, 2006).

One of the issues many recent immigrants face is family separation due to sequential migration. In a study including 385 immigrant families, 85% had experienced separation from immediate family members. Among Mexican immigrants, 42% of children were separated from their father only, 40% from both parents, and 2% were separated from their mother only. The study also found that 28% had been separated from siblings (Suárez-Orazco, Todorova, & Louie, 2002). Local data shows similar numbers. Paul Smokowski estimated that one third of the participating families in his *Entre dos Mundos* project in rural NC had experienced separation during immigration (P. R. Smokowski, personal communication, November 14, 2012). Perreira et al., (2006) reported that 89% of immigrant families in NC had experienced separation.

Immigration from Mexico to the US often results in separation from family members for a variety of reasons. Some families immigrate sequentially in order for one (usually the father) or both parents to first live and work in the US while sending money to support the family. The plan for the rest of the family to follow is often delayed and visits are difficult because of immigration laws (Smokowski & Bacallao, 2011). After a family immigrates there is the risk of one or more family members being deported, again causing family separation (Chang-Muy, 2009). In both of these instances immigration laws in the US make family separation more likely and reunification more difficult.

Implications of Separation

Immigrants face many issues related to the status of immigration whether documented or undocumented. In the case of being undocumented, immigrants experience the added stress of fear related to their status. In fact, fear of deportation is sometimes a reason immigrants do not visit government agencies (Cavazos-Rehg, Zayas, & Spitznagel, 2007). There is a real chance of deportation which can lead to further family separation for mixed-status families. Often in these families, one or more parents are undocumented and some or all of the children are US citizens (Chang-Muy, 2009).

Specifically, immigration related separation can have negative effects on families and individuals. Disruption in the family dynamics can cause children to emotionally separate from the absent parent and attach to the present caretaker. This then leads to conflict in reunification as children and parents may have expectations of a smooth, happy transition, but are faced with trying to re-attach to what seems like a new person. Conflict over the parent's authority is one

result. The disrupted attachment and conflict during reunification can lead to depression, anxiety, and other mental health concerns among the children (Suárez-Orazco, Bang, & Kim, 2011). Santa-María and Cornille (2007) reported that children who have been separated from family members during immigration tend to experience higher rates of PTSD. Children who experienced separation from one or both parents generally showed more signs of depression and anxiety. At the end of a five-year study the symptoms had abated somewhat. However, for Mexican children who were separated from their mothers, anxiety was sustained over time. The longer the separation, the longer the symptoms lasted (Suárez-Orazco et al., 2011). Children who were separated from parents during immigration even perform more poorly in school than their peers (Gindling & Poggio, 2012). In addition to adverse effects of the separation and reunification process, the acculturation process is stressful and can also lead to maladjustment, psychopathology and substance abuse and continued conflict among family members (Sciarra, 1999; Fraser, Kirby, & Smokowski, 2004).

The following quotes express the stress, conflict and uncertainty of reunification and acculturation experienced by many immigrants.

> The mother of a 13-year-old Nicaraguan boy disclosed, We are getting used to each other. We are both beginning a different life together … [T]he kids are jealous of each other and my husband is jealous of them … Jealousy exists between those who were born here and those who were not. My son says: "You already spent a lot of time with her [his younger sister born in the United States]."
>
> Central American mother of 13-year old girl: Our relationship has not been that good. We were apart for eleven years and communicated by letters. We are now having to deal with that separation. It's been difficult for her and for me. It's different for my son because I've been with him since he was born. If I scold him he understands where I'm coming from. He does not get angry or hurt because I discipline him but if I discipline [my daughter] she takes a completely different attitude than he. I think this is a normal way to feel based on the circumstances. (Suárez-Orazco et al., 2011, pp. 244, 246)

Similar to Suarez-Orazco et al. (2011), Smokowski and Bacallao (2011) discuss sequential immigration. They point out that this disrupts family functioning by shifting the roles and patterns of functioning for the family. They also found that families report separation usually lasts longer than expected. All of this has caused strain on the relationships. Coping strategies developed during separation led to problems in reunification as we also see illustrated in the quotes above.

Specific service needs:

Existing services for addressing these mental health and family cohesion needs are sometimes present but may be underutilized. Undocumented immigrants have limited access, and a fear of accessing available services (Cavazos-Rheg et al., 2007). Early intervention seems to be the best treatment for new immigrants. However, building rapport and trust may be more difficult until newcomers begin to feel more comfortable in the new environment (Santa-María & Cornille,

2007). Based on observations, in the Durham area there are few known mental health services available to Spanish speaking immigrants. Services often require payment, limiting access for uninsured immigrants. Those that are easier to access have long wait lists and are generally overwhelmed. There is a need for more mental health services with a greater variety of options. More funding to hire bilingual professionals and fund programs that target immigrant families is needed.

In addressing these needs, interventions should be culturally sensitive. Professionals should consider cultural differences in family norms. For example families from African and Caribbean cultures may be more resilient to family separation as child fostering by family members is a norm. In these cases, attachment theory may not be as applicable on a broad level as it is in western cultures. In addition, intervention development should draw on existing resiliency such as the tendency of families and individuals to return to a norm or equilibrium. Specifically in Suárez-Orazco and colleagues' study, symptoms of depression, anxiety, and PTSD tended to abate over time with the exception of anxiety in Mexican children who had been separated from their mothers. In general, the clinicians also have the responsibility to recognize loss and disruption of sequential immigration. In so doing they can help families address changes in relationships during separation and after reunification (Smokowski & Bacallao, 2011).

The next section will address the chosen intervention, *Entre dos Mundos,* which is currently unavailable in the Triangle area of NC. Funds, space, and trained professionals are lacking in order to implement the intervention on a long term basis. It has been offered as a pilot study in rural NC as a youth violence prevention program (P. R. Smokowski, personal communication, November 14, 2012).

Proposed and Implemented Intervention

Entre dos Mundos (Between two Worlds) is a bicultural skills training intervention developed by Paul Smokowski and Martica Bacallao. Helping families develop bicultural skills and understand the acculturation process is an effective way to address the familial conflict and mental health concerns resulting from separation and reunification of immigrating families. Biculturalism itself can be a protective factor and coping strategy for immigrant families. It is associated with higher levels of family cohesion and adaptability as well as lower levels of family conflict. Biculturalism has also shown improvement in psychological adjustment and is associated with lower levels of depression. *Entre dos Mundos* is based on earlier versions of Bicultural Effectiveness Training (BET), both of which have foundations in risk and protective factors theory, family systems theory, acculturation research, and alternation theory. Alternation theory purports that biculturalism is more beneficial than assimilation when acculturating (Smokowski & Bacallao, 2011; Bacallao & Smokowski, 2009). Specifically, BET has been shown to be effective in families that have experienced separation. Szapocznik et al., 1986 found BET to be as effective as brief structural family therapy in a pilot study.

Entre dos Mundos is designed as a multifamily group therapy. It incorporates group therapy approaches, family therapy techniques, as well as "psychodrama" techniques. Psychodrama involves interactive role-play such as role reversal, doubling, mirror, and re-enactment of crucial events in family life. The intervention is an eight-week program for eight to ten families

specifically targeting adolescents and their immigrant families. Topics highlighted in the intervention include: family changes and balancing demands from two cultures, worries for family members, cultural conflict and family reactions, discrimination, school participation, relationships with non-Latinos, future thinking, and application (Smokowski & Bacallao, 2011).

Organizational Case Study

The Exchange Clubs' Family Center in Durham is the host organization for the proposed intervention. The Exchange Clubs is a nation wide service organization that has historically focused on child abuse prevention. In 1992, the Exchange Clubs of Durham started the Exchange Clubs' Child Abuse Prevention Center. Later, the name changed to reflect the positive focus on supporting parents and families. The mission of the Center is "strengthening area families and preventing child abuse through family support and parent education programs." The services offered are free for Durham County residents and most are offered in English and Spanish. Funding for the Family center is primarily through local and national grants. Funders include NC Department of Social Services, United Way, National Exchange Club Foundation, Prevent Child Abuse NC, and the Greater Durham Exchange Clubs.

The Family Support Program (FSP) s one of three programs within the Family Center. FSP targets families with children ages birth to 10 years. To support the families, the program provides parenting classes and in-home interventions including Parent Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT) and Safe Care. Safe Care targets parents of children birth to 5 years who need support in providing safe, age appropriate care for their children. PCIT is focused on strengthening the relationship between the parent and child and training parents in positive discipline skills. In addition to these interventions, FSP provides parenting workshops at local agencies for groups of parents or caregivers.

The Family Support Program at the Exchange Clubs' Family Center was a good fit for the intervention. The focus on strengthening parent-child relationship created a supportive environment to develop the intervention. The agency already serves many Latino families in a supportive way and has the expertise to help make the intervention appropriate for the population they are familiar with. In the community they are respected and known for giving parenting workshops. Specifically, the agency has a good relationship with El Centro Hispano where the staff occasionally facilitates parenting groups and offers workshops. El Centro Hispano had even asked FSP to provide a parenting workshop on raising bicultural children recently.

El Centro Hispano is a community-based organization with one of its offices located in downtown Durham. The mission is to strengthen the Latino communities in Durham, Chapel Hill, and Carrboro. This is accomplished through programs in health, service, education, and community organizing. The programs include *Circulo de Padres* (Circle of Parents), a group of Latino parents who meet weekly to discuss and learn about parenting. The *Circulo de Padres* group at El Centro Hispano is the group that I facilitated using the proposed intervention.

El Centro Hispano was chosen for the implementation of Raising Bicultural Children because of their respected status in the Latino community in Durham. They provide many services and serve

mainly Latino immigrants. They also have an established parenting group. The parents feel comfortable with each other and are able to discuss their own struggles and successes. The parenting group often invites guests to facilitate. I had attended a parenting group in the past when another FSP therapist had led the group, so I knew the format, the leader, and some of the parents who attended.

Steps to completing the intervention

In discussing with the developer plans to implement *Entre dos Mundos* at a local agency, it was decided that modification would be needed. Limitations included that I was only able to offer one two-hour session instead of eight weeks of a consistent therapy group. The parents were already part of an established group that met weekly, but the children did not attend, and the facility did not have a room large enough for the entire family to attend even for the one session. The group of parents was also much larger than the ideal group for *Entre dos Mundos* with regular attendance around 15 parents. My lack of training as a family group therapist was a concern as well.

Modifications were needed to make the intervention more suitable for the one-time session I was able to provide. Specifically, we discussed that psychodrama tends to bring up deeper issues often with strong emotions that are better addressed over time, in a more intimate group, and with a trained and experienced therapist. So we decided it was important to avoid psychodrama or other activities that might bring up issues needing therapeutic attention. Since I was only able to provide one session, I had to select specific topics and leave out some important ones. We were both aware that these changes would make the modified version drastically different than the original intervention. We recognized that it was no longer a therapy group but a workshop. The topic was the same and some of the content would be very similar, but the purpose of my workshop was completely different than the purpose of the original intervention. For this reason, I chose a new name for my workshop- Raising Bicultural Children (*Creciendo a Hijos Biculturales).*

I discussed the ideas with the director of FSP at Exchange Clubs' Family Center, Rachel Galanter. We decided that I would complete the bicultural session for Circulo de Padres at El Centro Hispano. This included developing a facilitator's guide for my own use and future use of FSP staff. The handout provided to the group was a Spanish translation of the acculturation diamond used in *Entre dos Mundos* and presented in Smokowski and Bacallao (2011); see Appendix 1.

In the process of developing the handout and facilitators guide I was in contact with Paul Smokowski. He provided me with practical advice for facilitating the group, feedback about which topics I was considering including, and materials needed for the handouts.

I also met with the leader of the Circle of Parents, Fanny Fragoso at El Centro Hispano. She gave me a more in-depth explanation of the typical format of the group, what is expected of the facilitator, what has been discussed in the past related to biculturalism, and what the participants would like to hear. We set a date for me to facilitate the group and a prior date for me to observe and meet some of the parents.

After developing the facilitator's guide, I shared the draft with Rachel Galanter and Paul Smokowski to gain feedback. I made their suggested changes and finalized the guide. I met with my colleague, Leah Parrish to discuss the format and review the facilitator's guide. Finally, with her assistance, I facilitated the two-hour session on Raising Bicultural Children at El Centro Hispano.

The actual workshop began with a time of introductions in order for Leah and me to get to know the participants. We then discussed the meaning of, and components of culture. Participants shared what culture means to them and what aspects of their culture of origin are most important to them. We talked about the deeper values that lie beneath some of the expressions of culture. Participants then shared what they like and don't like about their culture of origin and about the host culture (the culture of the US). The next section was more teaching than discussion and focused on the acculturation process. Using the diamond, I explained the different ways that immigrants may acculturate. This includes Separation, Assimilation, Marginalization, and Biculturalism. We discussed how Biculturalism is not when a person's culture changes based on the context, but that one is able to adapt to two different cultures depending on the context. We then encouraged participants to mark a large acculturation diamond drawn on the board to indicate where they felt they were in the diamond (see Appendix 1). The group discussed their responses and discussed where they saw their children in the diamond. To deepen the understanding of biculturalism I explained that it takes the form of a cycle, as compared to assimilation, which is more of a linear acculturation process. Finally, we talked about what this looks like in our daily family life. How having family members on different levels of acculturation affects relationships, and how one deals with those effects.

At the end of the session the participants filled out an evaluation of the workshop. Eleven of the participants completed an evaluation and all 11 reported that they benefited from the workshop and that they learned something they plan to apply to their families. Specifically, parents reported wanting to make sure their children learn both cultures.

References

Bacallao, M. & Smokowski, P. R. (2009). Entre dos mundos/Between two worlds: Bicultural development in context. *Journal of Primary Prevention, 30*, 421-451. doi: 10.1007/s10935-009-0176-x

Cavazos-Rehg, P. A., Zayas, L. H., & Spitznagel, E. L. (2007). Legal status, emotional well-being and subjective health status of Latino immigrants. *Journal of The National Medical Association, 99*(10), 1126-1131.

Chang-Muy, F. (2009). Legal classifications of immigrants. In F. Chang-Muy, & E. P. Congress (Eds.), *Social work with immigrants and refugees: Legal issues, clinical skills, and advocacy* (pp. 39-62). New York: Springer Publishing Company.

Ennis, S. R., Ríos-Vargas, M., & Albert, N. G. (2011). The Hispanic population: 2010. *2010 Census Briefs.* U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, U.S. Census Bureau. Retrieved from: http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-04.pdf

Fraser, M. W., Kirby, L. D., & Smokowski, P. R. (2004). Risk and resilience in childhood. In M. W. Fraser (Ed.), *Risk and resilience in childhood: An ecological perspective* (2nd ed., pp. 13-66). Washington, DC: NASW Press.

Gindling, T., & Poggio, S. (2012). Family separation and reunification as a factor in the educational success of immigrant children. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 38*(7), 1155-1173. doi: 10.1080/1369183X.2012.681458

Passel, J., Cohn, D., & Gonzalez-Barrera, A. (2012). *Net migration from Mexico falls to zero—and perhaps less.* Retrieved from Pew Hispanic Center website: http://www.pewhispanic.org/2012/04/23/net-migration-from-mexico-falls-to-zero-and-perhaps-less/

Perreira, K.M., Chapman, M.V., & Stein, G.L. (2006). Becoming an American parent: Overcoming challenges and finding strength in a new immigrant Latino community. *Journal of Family Issues, 27*(10), 1383-1414. doi: 10.1177/0192513X06290041

Santa-Maria, M. L., & Cornille, T. (2007). Traumatic stress, family separations, and attachment among Latin American immigrants. *Traumatology 13*(26), 26-31. DOI: 10.1177/1534765607302278

Smokowski, P. R., & Bacallao, M. (2011). *Becoming bicultural: Risk, resilience, and Latino youth.* New York: University Press.

Suárez-Orozco, C., Bang, H. J., & Kim, H. Y. (2011). I felt like my heart was staying behind: Psychological implications of family separations & reunifications for immigrant youth. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 26*(2), 222-257. doi: 10.1177/0743558410376830

Suarez-Orozco, C., Todorova, I., & Louie, J. (2002). Making up for lost time: The experience of separation and reunification among immigrant families. *Family Process*, *41*(4), 625-643.

Szapocznik, J., Santisteban, D., Kurtines, W., Perez-Vidal, A., & Hervis, O. (1986). Bicultural effectiveness training (BET): An experimental test of an intervention modality for families experiencing intergenerational/intercultural conflict. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, *8*(4), 303-330.

Annotated Bibliography

Artico, C. I. (2003). ***Latino families broken by separation: The adolescent's perspective.*** **New York: LFB Scholarly Publishing LLC.**

This book discusses the effects of separation on attachment. Specifically when immigrating families do so in stages, parents often leave young children behind for several years while they get established in the states and then send for them. Depending on the timing and duration of the separation, the effect can be disrupted attachment. Children may have difficulty reconciling the reasons for parents leaving. All of this can lead to insecurities, depression, and other mental health problems for the children. Reunited families who have already experienced separation and then experience the acculturation gap may be facing several risk factors at once.

Gill, H. (2006). ***Going to Carolina del Norte: Narrating the Mexican migrant experiences.*** **Chapel Hill, NC: The University Center for International Studies.**

Gill and colleagues communicate the migration experience in written stories as well as photographs. A visual and written account, these narratives focus on immigrants in NC who have come from Mexico.

Falicov, C. J. (1998). ***Latino families in therapy: A guide to multicultural practice.*** **New York: The Guildford Press.**

This book begins by discussing the benefit of using a universal perspective of cultural sensitivity. Instead of trying to learn general aspects of the Latino culture and applying this to every case, a sensitivity to a variety of cultural values will assist in building the therapeutic relationship. The author also discusses considering the perspective you bring as the therapist. Recognize that your opinions and judgments of other's values will be affected by your own cultural perspective. Avoid comparison as this is only a reflection of your perspective and not an objective evaluation of the client or client's behavior. Later chapters address topics including the history of Latino immigration, the migration experience, adapting to the host culture, facing discrimination, and navigating the systems in the US. This will be a valuable book for growing as a therapist and being able to better serve Latino immigrants in the US.

Lopez, M. E. (2010). ***My heart was over there with you and I was here: Exploring the immigration narratives of families separated during the course of migration*** **(Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest. (UMI No. 3449010)**

Lopez's dissertation proved valuable in offering several sources from the reference list. The author recounts several stories of immigrant families and the effect of separation. Many of her main points are found in the Suarez-Orazco articles. Her paper offers further insight into the actual experiences as she is focused on the qualitative data.

Sciarra, D. T. (1999). Intrafamilial separations in the immigrant family: Implications for cross-cultural counseling. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 27*(18), 30-41.

Sciarra writes addressing counselors who work with immigrant families who have experienced separation. The author recognizes acculturaltion as a major factor in familial conflict. He approaches counseling of immigrant families with a focus on acculturation. This is in line with Bicultural Effectiveness Training (BET). During his structural family therapy sessions, Sciarra uses reframing to show how cultural differences, rather than individuals or even the family system, contribute to the conflict.

Wessler, S. F. (2011). *Shattered families: The perilous intersection of immigration enforcement and the child welfare system*. Retrieved from Applied Research Center Website: http://arc.org/shatteredfamilies

Wessler reports on deportation of immigrant parents whose children are left behind and placed into foster care. He brings to light the variety of injustices against parents and children who are separated. This includes parents who report domestic violence to the police and then get detained while their children stay with the violent partner. Some are charged with neglect when they report a partner who is abusing their children and then get detained. Undocumented parents are at risk for being charged with neglect in this case because they sometimes do hesitate to report abuse for fear of being deported and separated from their children.