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The Strengths of Recent Latino Immigrant Parents Raising Young Children: An Application of the Concepts of Human Agency

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Introduction

One of the tenets of the social learning theory is that people are not only products of environmental influences but also producers of environmental changes. Albert Bandura (2006) stated, “People are self-organizing, proactive, self-reflecting. They are not simply onlookers of their behavior. They are contributors to their life circumstances, not just products of them” (p. 164).

This view of human agency can provide a fresh insight into the migration patterns and adjustment of immigrant families into the United States, challenging traditional deficit approaches (Silverman, 2011) and highlighting family strengths. The vast literature on migration has consistently documented that this cultural experience involves a series of adaptations that tax personal and family resources (Hovey, 1999; Torres & Wallace, 2013). For instance, upon arrival, immigrants face psychological stressors as a result of separating from their homeland and loved ones and encountering societal stressors: discrimination, restrictive immigration laws, and lack of or limited access to basic health care, education, and social services (Arbona et al., 2010; Ullmann, Goldman, & Massey, 2011). Often, recent immigrants encounter language barriers, and some lack legal status, factors that increase the challenges of adjusting to a new environment (Pérez & Fortuna, 2005). Although some immigrants may encounter similar experiences during adjustment into the receiving communities, there are, of course, differences within immigrant groups based on contextual sociopolitical factors in the sending communities, countries of origin, reasons for migration, and the presence of children. Furthermore, while migration is a concept that is often used to describe the practice of an individual—considered as an immigrant—usually the literature on migration overlooks the experience of immigrants as the parents of young children and as family members, which add to the diversity of this population (Suarez-Orozco & Carhill, 2008). Particularly in the United States, recent trends show a significant increase in the number of children younger than 18 years of age living with an immigrant parent—a growth of 51% from 1995 to 2014 (Child Trends Data Bank, 2014). Also, in a consideration of the immigrant population in the United States, the Latino population is the largest heterogeneous ethnic minority group (Brown & Lopez, 2013), and approximately 11% of Latino children are foreign-born (Fry & Passel, 2009). This statistic suggests that many first-generation Latino immigrant parents bring their young children with them (the 1.5 generation). Moreover, nearly 40% of Latino children who are born in the United States (second generation) have at least one unauthorized first-generation parent

(Yoshikawa & Kholoptseva, 2013). Therefore, some immigrant families face unique factors, including lack of legal status, and a significant number of them are raising children between the ages of 0 and 7 years (Fortuny, Hernandez, & Chaudry, 2010), heightening the stress related to parenting newborns, infants, preschoolers, and early elementary school-age children. As a result, the combined stressors of parenthood and relocation cause a specific group of immigrant parents to encounter an additional set of challenges to a successful adjustment (Arbona et al., 2010). Yet, little attention has been devoted to the experience of recent Latino immigrant parents as *human agents*, mainly those who are raising young children, and to parents' sense of adjustment.

Recent Latino Immigrants Families

Adjustment to major life events such as migration and parenthood varies among recent immigrants. The extensive literature on acculturative stress, and its vital contribution to the understanding of migration experiences, has chronicled the numerous challenges faced by recent Latino immigrants (Magana & Hovey, 2003; Salgado, Castañeda, Talavera, & Lindsay, 2012). While we know about the effects of family separation and language difficulties among documented and undocumented parents (Arbona et al., 2010), research exploring children's developmental outcomes has provided insight on the family adjustment process. For instance, Martinez, McClure, Eddy, and Wilson (2011) noted the unique complexity of the role that time in residence in the United States plays in both parents' and children's socio-emotional adjustment, especially documenting the high level of stress reported by newly arrived parents with school-age youth averaging 13.4 years of age. Still, nowhere is this adjustment to high levels of stress more apparent than among newly arrived parents of young children.

Recent immigrant parents of young children struggle with tensions between their cultural beliefs (traditions) and socialization strategies in relation to effective child-rearing practices that adhere to their core culture constructs of *respect* and *familismo* (Calzada, Huang, Anicama, Fernandez, & Brotman, 2012; Delgado-Gaitan, 2001; Domenech, Donovan, & Crowley, 2009; Santisteban, Coatsworth, Briones, Kurtines, & Szapocznik, 2012). In addition, compared with families that have older children or adolescents, this group of parents with young children encounters challenges navigating preschools, schools, and medical systems, particularly accessing health care services for their infants, toddlers, or preschoolers (Stevens, West-Wright, & Tsai, 2010); acquiring information on school readiness or preschool programs (Johnson, Han, Ruhm, & Waldfogel, 2014) and child care resources (Rafaelli & Wiley, 2012); and gaining information and building

connections with local elementary schools (Perreira, Chapman, & Sten, 2006; Segal & Mayadas, 2005).

Although research initiatives have focused on positive outcomes among immigrants (Parra-Cardona, Bullock, Imig, Villarruel, & Gold, 2006; Taylor et al., 2012), relatively little information is known about the unique experience of newly arrived Latino immigrant parents who are raising young children. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the experience of immigrant Latino parents with children as young as 7 years of age, particularly by examining their decision-making processes during the premigration period, the processes they undergo while settling into their new home, and the postmigration experience in relation to their perceived sense of well-being in their receiving communities. Moving away from a deficit model and targeting families of children between the ages of 0 and 7 years, the study focused mainly on identifying the positive effects of family strengths and human agency—providing additional support to the role of human agency as an internal asset that influences adjustment (Bandura, 2001). This study placed immigrant parents as active producers of actions and changes, giving meaning and direction to their personal circumstances and family functioning.

Sense of Adjustment Among Immigrants

Despite reporting experiencing high level of stress, immigrants have also reported coping successfully with the migration experience by using positive evaluations and adaptive interpretations of their circumstances (Magana & Hovey, 2003), describing a strong family connection (Reese, 2002) and a positive attitude that was reflected in their commitment to their children, family, and communities (Parra-Cardona, Cordova, Holtrop, Villarruel, & Wieling, 2008; Parra-Cardona et al., 2006). Moreover, recent immigrants appear to retain their cultural identity, values, and practices while also learning the cultural practices of the mainstream culture (Trueba, 2002). This adaptive strategy denotes that immigrants are able to adjust their behavior to meet the environmental/cultural demands while keeping a connection with their sending communities and personal goals (e.g., securing a job and supporting their family). A systematic review of the literature on *resilience* among Latino immigrant families (Cardoso & Thompson, 2010) documents four major factors—individual assets, family strengths, cultural factors, and community support—related to positive adjustment (i.e., mental and physical health, education, substance abuse, and parenting practices). Unfortunately, the majority of the studies sampled the experiences of women/mothers and adolescents/youth (Cardoso & Thompson, 2010).

Theoretical Approaches

The family resilience perspective acknowledges healthy family functioning despite environmental and situational stressful factors (Walsh, 2003). When immigrant parents face migration-related stress, external and internal resources within the family system, as well as personal characteristics and abilities, ease the negative outcomes and foster positive family adjustments (Cardoso & Thompson, 2010; Parra-Cordona et al., 2008).

Strengths Perspective and Human Agency

The strengths approach highlights the resilience of immigrants and their level of resourcefulness in seeking the necessary tools within and around them, creating a sense of control over their lives (DeFrain & Asay, 2007; Furuto, 2004). This approach acknowledges that within each family, there is a level of internal functionality beyond family structure—not the absence of challenges, but how families adjust and cope with stressors (DeFrain & Asay, 2007). Along the same lines, the concept of *human agency* is relevant to the understanding of the experience of recent immigrant parents, capable of self-organizing, self-regulating, and being proactive in response to their needs and environmental circumstances. Particularly, Bandura (2006) postulated that one of the properties of human agency is *intentionality*, which guides the action plan and strategies. Another property is *forethought*, which encompasses the visualized goals or anticipated likely outcomes. The third principle is *self-reflectiveness*, denoting that people reflect on their own functioning (personal efficacy). These three properties have practical applications for understanding the experiences of recent immigrant parents. The concept of human agency among immigrants encompasses reasons for migration, planning, and motivation (Elder, 1994; Ogbu, & Simons, 1998). These insights make it possible to conceptualize the experience of immigration as one of active choices and actions. Bandura also proposed that people are *agents*, and as such, they are originators of experience, not merely reactive organisms that are shaped and guided/directed by environmental forces. Human agency places the immigrant parents as active participants, evaluating contextual factors and personal resources as well as reflecting on immediate needs and well-being (Gong, Xu, Fujishiro, & Takeuchi, 2011). Thus, recent immigrant parents, as agents, build their life in a new environmental context, along with the social constraints and challenges (Elder, 1994).

Consequently, the subjective perception of adjustment by immigrant parents needs to be understood within contextual factors as they relate to their perceived overall family well-being (Ayón, 2013). Considering that

there is variation within immigrant groups (Buriel, 2012; Fuller & Garcia-Coll, 2010) and that it is recognized that the presence of young children has an influence on family decision making (Kelly, 2009), it is important to extend the literature on the experience of immigrant parents who are raising young children by examining their premigration factors (decision-making processes), the processes they undergo while settling into their new environment, and postmigration factors in relation to their perceived sense of well-being in their receiving communities.

The primary goal of this study, using a qualitative approach, was to uncover a pattern of rich descriptions of the experience of first-generation immigrant parents, including the process of migration, challenges, and the perception of family adjustment, under the premises that immigrant families deploy a set of personal resources, abilities, and cultural practices (family-oriented) to cope with demands and challenges of the host society (Fuller & Garcia-Coll, 2010; Furuto, 2004).

Methodology

This study was part of a larger research project that explored the experiences of first-generation immigrant parents raising young children in one Midwestern city. After institutional review board approval and recommendations, participants were primarily recruited from two community centers. Inclusion criteria consisted of the following: (1) being first-generation parents, (2) having children between the ages of 0 and 7 years, and (3) living in the United States for 8 years or less. Because the study focused on the experience of parents with young children who were recent immigrants, the length of residence was determined based on the age range of the young children being raised (younger than 7 years old). A trusted community service coordinator (native of Peru) assisted in the initial screening and identification of parents. A combination of convenience and snowball sampling techniques was used to obtain access to the research participants. With the collaboration of local not-for-profit agencies, flyers were posted and direct invitations were sent to potential families. Families meeting the criteria were initially contacted via phone, after which home visits were made to explain the project further and gain their consent.

Because this study explores how family processes are experienced, perceived, and interpreted by parents, an ethnographic approach was used (Creswell, 2007; Wilson, 1977). The data were generated via extensive field work over 7 months through home visits, semistructured interviews, and informal interactions. The first author (an immigrant who is a native of Puerto Rico) conducted intensive home visits consisting of participant observation, interaction with parents and their children in daily activities, and

discussions about their migration experience, work-related experience, and child-rearing and cultural practices. This method of data collection allowed the researchers to identify the parents' worldview, priorities, and values, as well as their specific language and expressions that should be used to represent the underlying constructs of interest. Data collection took place in one of the largest cities in the U.S. Midwest (southern Wisconsin), which has experienced a rapid growth of Latino immigrants (Long & Veroff, 2014).

Sample and Procedure

The informants comprised 20 parents (10 fathers and 10 mothers). The average age of the participants was 31 years (standard deviation [SD] = 4), 29 for the mothers and 32 for the fathers. Of these, 12 parents had proper documentation.¹ Only 45% of the parents had completed high school; 55% had less than a high school education. The median household income was \$36,000 (ranging from \$29,000 to \$48,000). Types of employment included custodial work at hospitals and universities, housekeeping, manual labor in factories, restaurant jobs, and mechanics. There were 5 homemakers, all of whom were female. All the parents had had either an infant or a toddler before migrating. The ages of their children ranged from 2 months to 8 years (average age of the children was 4 years). The number of years the parents had lived in the United States ranged from 2 to 6 (average of 4 years). The countries of origin included Mexico (6), Argentina (4), the Dominican Republic (4), Peru (2), and El Salvador (4).

Parents were interviewed in their homes, and interviews lasted approximately 50 minutes. Confidentiality was guaranteed, and pseudonyms have been used to protect their identity. The open-ended questions were generated to capture the overall context of the parents' experiences before migration and during the settlement process, and their current family experiences (Table 1). Prompt questions were used to gather more detailed responses. Interviews were conducted in Spanish by the first author and transcribed verbatim into Spanish with the aid of two research assistants.

Table 1. Sample Interview Questions

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1. Tell me about what motivated you to come to the United States?
 2. How was the process of coming? Talk me through that experience.
 3. Tell me about your experience raising your children in the United States.
-

¹ Legal status was not directly asked; parents shared this information voluntarily during either interviews or home visits.

-
4. Compared with before you moved to the United States, how would you describe your life as a family now?
-

Data Analysis

The analysis was completed in Spanish, and for the purpose of this article, quotes were translated into English with the use of back-translation for accuracy purposes to ensure semantic equivalence (Knight, Tein, Prost, & Gonzalez, 2003). Identification numbers were assigned to each transcript, and pseudonyms were used for each participant and family member to maintain confidentiality. A thematic analysis was used for the data (Boyatzis, 1998). To identify patterns within and across transcripts, data coding and analysis involved the following: making comparisons; categorizing, naming, and assigning a number (and a code) to each theme that emerged first from a single transcript; and identifying individuality in the other transcripts. Major codes were assigned for relevant themes commonly occurring across interview transcripts. Within a category, related patterns of responses were evaluated for creating dimensions. The author and two research assistants completed the first set of analyses with 75% of the transcripts. Each one independently analyzed the transcripts and identified major themes and categories. Trustworthiness of the data involved the implementation of a clear protocol to code the transcripts and triangulation (Patton, 1999). Meetings were held to discuss patterns of categories and dimensions; disagreements were resolved by referring back to the transcripts. Feedback was obtained from one outreach community coordinator and two parents; their comments about the identified themes were included in the analysis of the remaining transcripts. The second set of analyses involved reviewing the remainder of the transcripts while using the major codes identified. The same themes arose again, reaching saturation.

Results

The results presented below describe the overall patterns and meanings experienced by the participating parents. The results are organized based on the contextual experiences: pre-migration, settlement, and postmigration. The emergent themes and quotations illustrate the concept of human agency and use the parents' own voices to provide a clear understanding of their experiences and perceptions of adjustment.

Premigration Contextual Experience

Intentionality and forethought: evaluation, reason, and motivation. Based on the human agency framework, *intentionality* refers to

actions with intentions and a strategic plan to achieve them. This also involves a *shared intention* among members of a group. Simultaneously, *forethought* refers to setting goals and visualizing the anticipated consequences. Together, these two properties of the human agency set the stage for immigrants to evaluate current circumstances and formulate a logical reason for action, which was guided by their motivation (needs). Particularly, in this study, parents' initial responses to the question, What motivated you to come to the United States? were "*my family*" and "*my children*." All the parents reported having an infant, toddler, or preschooler before migrating. Parents reported that their initial plans to migrate to the United States were determined primarily by financial reasons, access to health care services, and future education for their children. The following themes capture the concepts of intentionality and *forethought* as reflected by the main reasons for migrating, illustrating *initial intention* and *hope*.

Financial reasons. Parents in this study reported that they immigrated to the United States largely for economic reasons and "*job opportunities*." All of them self-identified as "*poor*" in their home country, "*struggling financially*" or "*making ends meet for their family*." Most of the mothers reported being unemployed in their sending communities, and 70% of the fathers had held unstable jobs (seasonal or without a steady flow of income) back in their home countries. Providing for their children was a major theme that emerged throughout the transcripts. For example, Nathalia, a mother of two children from El Salvador, expressed this: "*We had a much more simple life there. But perhaps, there were not too many things to give to our children. Our plan was to secure a better future for them.*" The next quote summarizes one of the main reasons expressed by parents for coming to the United States: "*My children were the reason for coming to the United States; we planned the trip thinking about them, you have to think about how would you provide to them, without money and resources you struggle, so you evaluate your options ... and coming to the United States was one of them*" [Cristina-28, Argentina]. The comments concerning family and financial status (linked to job opportunities) were consistent among all the parents.

Health care reasons. Another theme that reflected the principle of *forethought* was health care, related to their family's and children's well-being. Parents visualized better health services and resources and anticipated better outcomes for their children's health (access to medicine). The parents mentioned the high cost of medicine and the problem with the long waiting hours experienced in their sending communities. The parents elaborated that one of their motivations for moving was their belief that in the United States they would receive better health care and would have

better access to community resources. Three of the families had children with special needs, including speech and language impairment, epilepsy, and autism. Before coming to the United States, these parents believed that their children would receive better medical treatments and services. These parents expressed that upon arrival, they approached community service programs (nonprofit organizations) to search for information that would benefit them and their children. They also reported that they had relatives and friends in the United States who informed them about available resources. One mother indicated, *“My cousin told us about this woman [community outreach coordinator] who works with immigrant families and how she had helped families with children with special needs ... one of the first things that we did when we came was to talk to her ... to help us find services for my daughter”* [Rosario-28, Mexico].

With the assistance of nonprofit community organizations (referrals), the parents of children with special needs qualified to receive early childhood intervention services. These parents reported that they currently receive physical therapy, speech–language therapy, and classroom aids. They also mentioned having interpreter services during in-home therapy visits.

Other parents, whose children did not have special needs, expressed feeling comfortable seeking health services and access to medicine.

Children’s schooling. In addition to health-related concerns, other themes related to *intentionality* were educational opportunities and the advancements associated with learning English as reasons that motivated them to immigrate to the United States. For example, Carlos, a father of three children from Mexico, expressed, *“I am glad that we are here; my children are receiving a good education. That was one of the reasons for coming. I wanted for them to learn English and get ahead, not like us.”* Margarito, from Argentina, declared, *“We came here because of our children ... the important thing is for them to get a good education and learn English. A good education will make them be somebody in life [ser alguien en la vida].”*

Family’s well-being. Parents expressed that they had felt hesitant before immigrating to the United States, particularly with the settlement process, forcing them to evaluate their choices. Rosario, a mother of three children, shared her perspective when she worked at the *maquiladoras* (“factories”) in Mexico: *“When I worked at the maquiladoras, before I had children, I heard people talking about wanting to work in the United States ... and I asked, ‘Why do you want to do that? People are discriminated there.’ But then, when you have a family, children ... things change, you*

need to look after them and evaluate what are the better options" [Rosario-28, Mexico].

Several parents shared similar levels of initial uncertainty, but also motivation, when reflecting on their family's well-being. Cristina, a mother of four children, expressed this reaction: *"I didn't want to come over here [United States]. I was afraid of coming, but you have to make sacrifices for your children"* [Cristina-28, Argentina]. Another father stated, *"First I was afraid, I didn't know what to expect. I was taking a risk. But you do it for your family ... and you have to plan well, like we did"* [Carlos-31, Mexico].

Despite the level of uncertainty, seeking better opportunities for their families was a theme related to their main motivator to migrate. The uncertainty prompted parents to evaluate options and plan strategies. Planning involved evaluating resources (money, family and friends living in the United States), and timing the length of residence in the United States. For example, Carlos expressed, *"Planning was not easy. We had to save money, talk to people, discuss who is going first, who is going to help us there after arriving ... you need to plan ahead if you want to get things right."*

A temporary move. The concept of *shared intention* is part of the principle of intentionality. When the parents' responses were evaluated, the pronoun "we" was often used by both mothers and fathers when they were reflecting on their intentions to migrate and the length of residence. This illustrates the shared purpose of two parents, demonstrating a level of agreement and shared goals of looking after their children and their family's well-being. The planned length of residence was one of the themes illustrating the shared intention. Before migrating, parents (particularly fathers) expressed that coming into the United States was a *temporary move*, intended to build financial capital, to take advantage of the opportunities offered, and to provide for their families with the idea of eventually returning back to their homeland. For these parents, the visualized goal of working in the United States was directly related to their hope of returning back to their home country. For example, one father, who has been in the United States for 4 years, said, *"What we are doing now is saving to return ... not now, eventually. The boys are doing well, they like the school, they are doing well, and I have a good job"* [Gustavo-36, Mexico]. Another father of three children from Mexico stated, *"Initially the plan was ... I would come alone, find a job, work for a while, and save money to bring the rest of the family.... Antonieta [wife] will come later with the children. That is what we did. Now, we all are here, but we are still planning going back eventually"* [Noe-31, Mexico]. Despite their initial concerns, parents evaluated the external and internal resources that guided their plans of action of migrating and their strategies. For example, one

parent may come first, then the other spouse with their children. This pattern of migration was consistent among all the parents in this study.

Settlement Process: External Resources, Role of Kinship Network (Family Strengths)

Planning and transnational support. A shared theme among these parents was the external resources, such as a *kinship network*, that guided the planning process. For all of the parents in this study, their decision to migrate was influenced by their strong connection with persons living in the receiving communities. Parents mentioned having cousins, siblings, parents, and friends who had been living in the United States for several years. These transnational communities shared information, ideas, and beliefs that indirectly (and directly) influenced parents' decision to migrate. One parent stated, *"You don't know where you are going, or what will happen when you get there, you have to rely on your family or friends that live there"* [Carlos-31, Mexico]. Before migration, and during phone conversations, relatives and friends encouraged the parents to immigrate. For example, Alejandro from El Salvador, who had several siblings in the United States, said, *"My brother used to call us frequently. He always said to me, 'Here, there are jobs for you, and better opportunities for the kids ... come over! We will help you getting situated.'"*

The majority of the parents expressed that planning was coordinated with those living in the sending communities, but also with the relatives and friends in their community of destination. For example, Esmeraldad, who has lived in the United States for 3 years, expressed, *"I am thankful ... and fortunate to have friends and family here [in the United States] ... without them, this couldn't have been possible"* [to be in the United States]. The parents shared that they knew, before moving, that their relatives in the United States would offer support with child care, housing, and transportation until they got established. Margarito, from Argentina, expressed, *"When I arrived, I stayed with my cousin and his family. He and the others [friends and family] were waiting for me ... and they were prepared ... they had a room for me, clothes, and they helped me to find a job."*

Also, the parents had relatives and friends back in their hometowns who offered assistance looking after their property (e.g., vehicles, houses, land) or providing temporary care of their children while the parents were settling in the United States. The majority of the parents interviewed left property in the care of their parents (or friends), and extended family members provided temporary assistance with child care during the settlement process.

Once parents reunited with their relatives and friends in the receiving communities, they expressed feeling *a sense of relief*. Their host relatives provided shelter, transportation, clothes, and functional information about jobs and housing. For example, Manolo, from Peru, expressed, *“I felt relieved when I arrived here ... it worked out.”* With the assistance of family members and friends in the receiving communities, parents (mostly husbands) reported having found a job within the first few months after arrival and saved enough money to be able eventually to bring their spouses and children.

Postmigration: Overcoming Challenges and Perceived Well-being

Parents reported several challenges, including a fear of getting in trouble with the law, separation from the immediate family, lack of proper documentation, inability to speak English, and child-rearing practices.

Coping with the English language barrier. Regarding the language barrier, parents expressed difficulty understanding others or communicating needs and wants when seeking services (e.g., in stores or with social agencies). The challenges were more salient when they were reflecting on their children’s schooling—for example: (1) difficulty communicating with their children’s schoolteachers and (2) inability to help their children with their schoolwork. Although parents expressed experiencing language barriers, they also mentioned doing the best they could to communicate given their limited English. However, they coped by using various strategies; for example, they mentioned asking friends or family members who were more proficient in English to help translating and interpreting. Angel, from the Dominican Republic, said, *“I understand a little bit of English, but I have trouble speaking it; I usually ask my brother to come with me when I need to talk to someone.”* Another mother, Julia, who has a son in the first grade, said, *“When my son brings his homework, I try my best to help him, even when I don’t understand English. I sit down with him, sometimes I ask Lorena [cousin’s daughter] to help us translate.”*

All the parents of school-age children oversaw their children’s homework and participated in extracurricular activities. Rosario, a mother of two school-age children, reflected, *“Even when I don’t speak English, I think it is important to spend time together doing homework. It is frustrating ... but we have to do it. We also need to attend school events. We need to be present. Even when we don’t say anything, our presence is important and says something about us ... that we care.”*

The majority of parents expressed a desire to learn English. Some have attended free classes offered by community organizations. Also, during the researchers’ home visits, the parents regularly asked to speak

English. Some parents wanted to practice, to learn new words, and to pronounce words correctly. Parents also expressed that even when they felt inadequate, they approached the school and tried their best to communicate with the teachers. Diana said, *"You can't be afraid because of the language; you need to try your best. Schools also have people who speak Spanish, or sometimes there is an interpreter. We have to make an effort."* Cristina, a parent from Argentina, said, *"There are people that help us interpreting. ... Sometimes at the store or when we go to places, people try to speak Spanish to us ... it helps."* Gustavo, a parent from Mexico, acknowledged the challenge of communication, but also the effort: *"It is difficult to communicate, but you have to make an effort to try to understand. I think that the majority of people ... my boss, coworkers, teachers, and the majority of people I meet, they make an effort. They see us trying to communicate and they make an effort to understand us ... not all, but the majority ... and I appreciate that."*

Child-rearing practices. In addition to coping with the language barrier, the majority of the mothers expressed concerns regarding disciplining their young children as one of their challenges. They mentioned that the government interferes with their parenting practices. For instance, Antonieta, a mother of four children, said,

The difficulty that we encounter here is that at school they told them, "Don't let your parents spank you, and if they do it, you can call the police." I think that saying that to them is something wrong. I think that I can discipline my children and sometimes spank them ... because sometimes they are doing something wrong, or they're misbehaving. I love my children and want them to be obedient, to have good manners ... to be respectful. I think that is why children are becoming disobedient ... for a lack of a good discipline.

Another mother, from the Dominican Republic, expressed a similar reaction:

The government interferes with child rearing, more than parents. The government doesn't know what is happening at home, they are not 24 hours with our children. If I scold my child [si le doy un regaño], it is because he has done something wrong. It is the parents' responsibility to tell the child, "No son, that's is not right, you have to do this. [Hijo, eso no está bien, tienes que hacer esto]." I think that the government and schools should respect our beliefs. Yes, I understand that it is important to have rules, but they should respect the rules of our beliefs. [Diana-26, Dominican Republic]

Despite this concern, parents also expressed a strong sense of parental efficacy and a belief in the importance of an involved and caring parent. For example, Julia, the mother of three children, stated,

Sometimes it can be difficult to discipline your children here [in the United States]. At school my kid was told that he could call 911 if we hit him. But I told him, "Son, if you do that ([call 911], then you would not be able see me again, they are going to take me away... or they might to take you away.... If I discipline you it is for your own good [si te corrijo es por tu bien]." Children need parents who are responsive and responsible enough to tell them when sometime is wrong. It is our job to educate our children, and spank them if necessary.

The majority of parents also expressed the importance of continuing teaching their family values, respect, obedience, and good manners, and of adjusting their practices without "giving in." Luz stated, *"You need to teach your children the value of respect and obedience.... When they do something wrong, I still spank them, but also I am talking more to them ... they understand."* Julia expressed, *"Sometimes when my son is misbehaving, I tell him, remember son, I don't want to spank you and you don't want to call 911, remember what will happen."*

Parents also compared their current child-rearing practices with those of other parents who are having difficulties raising adolescents. Some of the parents in the study had relatives and friends with adolescents or older children. Julia reflected, *"I have friends that feel they can't control their teenagers; they were afraid of getting in trouble. You need to stay in control, but you need to show your children that you love them."* Antonieta described a similar reaction:

Some parents of adolescents don't know how to control them [their children] ... that is the other extreme. I don't want to be there. You need to find ways to discipline without giving in your values. I think that you need to show and tell your kids that you love them. Now I can build that foundation with our children, they are still young.... I don't want to have the problems of those parents. You need to show your kids that you love them, but also you need to discipline them. They will understand. The other extreme is to let them do whatever they want because you are afraid they will call 911.

Overall, the majority of the parents expressed the importance of being there for their children. The experiences of others parents raising adolescents allowed the parents in this study to be aware of the challenges they faced regarding their children's attitude and behavior over time.

Functioning and reactive adjustment. Even though these families shared the experience of environmental stressor factors, they also expressed a general sense of well-being. One of the fathers stated, *"We are doing fine, we have had some difficulties, but we are managing being here, we do what it takes to survive"* [Omar, Dominican Republic]. Another mother indicated, *"It is difficult sometimes, but you keep adjusting ... at the end, everything works out. You have to believe that you can do it"* [Valeska-26, El Salvador].

Manolo stated, *"Sometimes you encounter negative things, but at the end everything works for good. Everything that has happened to us, good or bad, is God's will"* [Manolo-44, Peru]. Jesus, from Argentina, expressed, *"You will always encounter challenges ... it doesn't matter where you live ... here or in Argentina or in Canada. It is how you manage what you have and what is available to you."* Alejandro, from El Salvador, expressed a similar belief: *"You need to try your best. You have to focus on what you have instead of what you don't have."*

Noe, from Mexico, summarized the overall perception of adjustment shared among all the parents:

The way I see ... is like we have adjusted here, I'm with my family, they are doing well, the kids are going to school, there is food at the table, we have food in the refrigerator, we have a car, we know where we need to go, and who to call when we need help. I missed my hometown, but I am glad we moved here. Staying in Oaxaca [hometown], we would have been struggling there and not be able to provide for the children. Here we encounter difficulties, but we had difficulties there too, and we would have difficulties if we go back. Here, I have a job, and Antonieta works some hours; we are making more money here. I go to work and I come back to spend time with my kids. We go to church during the weekend and spend time with friends. At the end, we help each other out.

The majority of the fathers also expressed that they are spending more time with their children and taking more responsibility with child care and household tasks. These fathers have spouses who also work outside the home. They arrange the work shifts so one parent will be at home with the children. Some mothers also expressed feeling supported by their

husbands with child rearing and household chores. For example, Nathalia, a mother from El Salvador, stated,

One of the changes here is that he [husband] is more involved. His work schedule allows him to be here with the kids. He spends more time with them, cooks, and does laundry. In San Salvador, we would have been out looking for jobs or working long hours.

Adjustment and external support. Another main indicator for their sense of adjustment is related to their perception that they are together as a family, that their children are healthy, and that they are having contact with relatives in their home country (*transnationalism*). Parents mentioned a continuum of support from friends and extended family members in the community of destination. Parents' perceptions of *doing well* is based on *family togetherness*. Carlos, from Mexico, expressed, "*We are together as a family; we help each other out. It's good when you can rely on friends and family ... here and there.*"

Sense of control and financial stability. Another indicator of adjustment is related to *financial stability* and parents' perceived *sense of control* over their lives. For example, when reflecting on adjustment and well-being, parents expressed being *able to buy food, having mobility within the community, finding jobs, getting services, or having access to resources*. For all the parents, having "a stable job" was their hope, and they expressed a sense of accomplishment in having one. They indicated that having a stable job allows them to have enough financial capital to provide for their children and their family back in their sending communities. Parents expressed that they stayed in the United States primarily because of their children's well-being and because of the need to continue organizing their finances.

Overall, parents reported having a positive adjustment associated with what they have been able to accomplish and how well they have managed environmental challenges. The parents expressed a strong commitment to their children and family. For example, Julia stated, "*The most important thing about raising a child in this country is to be there for them ... we need to keep thinking positively and thinking about the opportunities for them here.*" Rita, from Argentina, stated, "*Teaching respect and obedience to my children is my priority; we need to continue teaching our values to them. It really doesn't matter where you live.*" Luz expressed the overall sense of human agency pre- and postmigration: "*We are continuing doing what we have done; we came here thinking about our*

children ... and us, finding a job and opportunities as a family, and we are continuing doing that today."

Discussion

The positive effects of human agency and family strengths in the parents of young children who are recent immigrants were explored within the context of migration and the settlement process. Past studies of immigrant families have generally not applied the concept of human agency and family strengths perspectives to examining the perceived overall adjustment of parents with young children who are recent immigrants. Research on immigrants has typically focused on deficit models, highlighting vulnerabilities, acculturative stress, and challenges. However, few studies have examined the strengths of immigrant families. In order to contribute to these limited efforts, this study aimed to understand the overall sense of adjustment from a contextual approach by taking into account the role of human agency at various phases of the migration process. The stories narrated by the parents demonstrated how the concept of human agency was exercised during pre- and postmigration, adding important insights for understanding the adjustment process and strengths among recent immigrants, particularly those raising young children.

Family caregiving involving young children and migration is not necessarily a negative experience, although it is essentially challenging under any circumstances. How families perceive life events and their confidence-seeking resources play a critical role in their perceived adjustment. As agents, immigrant parents employed *intentionality* and *forethought* surrounding family well-being (e.g., arranging suitable child care, finding and maintaining employment, and supporting children's academic success). The parents reported several reasons for coming to the United States; one of the main reasons revolved around their young children and overall family welfare. Before migrating, parents reflected on their external circumstances, such as poverty, lack of employment, limited income, limited education, and health care concerns. These concerns are embedded within the nature of caring for newborns, infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. The reflection on their needs leads parents to plan and take action. The parents in this study depicted themselves as agents—that is, within the context of their family experience, these parents *self-directed* to seek better opportunities (human agency) and took an active initiative in shaping their personal lives as well as their families. These parents had a clear reason to migrate (*intentionality*), which was related to their reported perceived family adjustment. The *forethought* of receiving adequate medical and educational resources for their young children propelled these

parents to action. For them, the process of *planning* and preparing played a key role in allocating and securing the necessary resources before migration (i.e., child care within a kinship network). Their assets were reflected in their reliance on their kinship network in their sending and receiving communities, which provided instrumental and informational support. These patterns of relationship between communities played a critical role in the *decision-making process* and a vital role in their adjustment during the settlement process and afterward. Particularly, these parents relied on kinship support to secure temporary child care for their young children. The kinship network of these families is consistent with the findings of previous studies (Menjivar, 1997) and reflects the concept of *familismo* that is widely discussed in the literature on Latino families (Santiago-Rivera, 2003). The pre- and postmigration social capital is a strength that influences the family dynamic.

In addition, within the context of child rearing, parents' beliefs in their ability to raise young children in the United States and their knowledge of available resources (pre- and postmigration) are central mechanisms of their human agency (Bandura, 2006). Parents are aware of the challenges of socializing their children within a more restricted environment—as they noted, “government interference.” Despite this, parents expressed a strong sense of agency when raising their early elementary school-age children, reflected in their accounts of the importance of adhering to core beliefs of respect and obedience within a context of parental responsiveness and sensitivity (e.g., “*you need to show your kids that you love them, but also you need to discipline them*”). Also, their current circumstances and family adaptation are perceived as a positive adjustment when the fathers are more involved in child rearing. This adaptation to a significant life event is shaped by the interaction between parents' perceptions and the available support resources.

Within the context of migration, it is common for immigrants to experience family separation and frequent displacement (Arbona et al., 2010). Thus, connection with loved ones and family togetherness are, of course, perceived as a positive adjustment. In this study, the parents reflected on being together with their children as a sense of well-being, while also maintaining a connection with their loved ones back in their home countries (*transnational connection*). Their cultural practices and beliefs are part of their daily lives. This was reflected in their transnational activities, such as practicing their faith (e.g., attending church), sending money to their home countries, using their homeland as a point of reference, and communicating with their extended family members. These practices of human agency create a continuum between “home” and current community

(Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997; Toro-Morn & Alicea, 2003), allowing recent immigrants to be connected to their cultural enclave for emotional and informational support.

Parents' perception of well-being was intertwined with their prior beliefs of upward mobility. These parents asserted the importance of taking advantage of the opportunities offered in the United States, such as having their children attend school (*"need a good education"*) and acquire proficiency in English. This is consistent with the literature on immigrant parents' beliefs about their children's education—mainly, believing that a formal education is a means to acquiring economic and social mobility (Ceja, 2004; Delgado-Gaitan, 2001).

Although the parents of early elementary school-age children highly value the importance of education, they also reported encountering challenges with their children's schooling, such as not being able to help them with schoolwork and not being able to communicate effectively with teachers. Nonetheless, parents, mostly the mothers of first and second graders, exercised an active role in helping with homework—by sitting down with their children, reminding them about the schoolwork, and ensuring that the homework was completed. Also, parents participated in school-based activities (parent-teacher conferences) and sought the help of external resources, such as cousins or older siblings, to translate. Parents' beliefs about education were linked with active participation in their children's schooling despite the language barrier.

Knowing that limited competency in English is prevalent among parents who are recent immigrants (Moles, 1993), it is noteworthy to mention that one should not assume that poor academic performance among the elementary school-age children of immigrant parents is due to lack of parental involvement or parental interest in their children's education. The parents in this study regarded education as an important aspect of their children's future and took active roles in supporting this belief. School efforts to support immigrant parents' involvement should be a priority among school administrators and elementary schoolteachers, acknowledging recent immigrant parents' level of education and language barriers (Garcia Coll et al., 2002; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005) and their disposition to participate in school-related activities.

Parents also reported a sense of efficacy related to raising their young children, of being capable of meeting the challenges of child rearing. Parents (mostly mothers) believe in their ability to manage the environmental difficulties and reported being able to control their children's behaviors, as well as their ability to provide adequate support and nurturance. Studies of immigrant families have found that parents with a

sense of efficacy tend to provide greater warmth to and control over their children, particularly when they are experiencing greater social support (Izzo, Weiss, Shanahan, & Rodriguez-Brown, 2000).

Despite their vicissitudes, the parents conveyed an overall sense of *doing well* and feeling positive about their adjustment. They had a strong devotion and disposition to provide and care for their young children. The findings are similar to those of Parra-Cardona et al. (2006) and Raffaelli and Wiley (2012) on immigrants' sense of adjustment. In these two studies of immigrant mothers of Mexican descent, the researchers reported the mothers' overall feeling of satisfaction with their lives despite the challenges encountered in the community of destination. In the current study, although the parents expressed that their initial plan was a temporary move, none of them expressed resentment about being in the United States. Although the parents reported facing hardships, they maintained a positive outlook and a certain level of hopefulness; as stated by Delgado-Gaitan (2001), among immigrants, "optimism prevails even in the midst of hardship" (p. 150). Major strengths are parental attitudes and a positive outlook. This attribute is another property of human agency, their capacity for *self-reflectiveness* (Bandura, 2006). Immigrant parents reflect on their actions, comparing their agency premigration with their actions postmigration (Gong et al., 2011).

Overall, the parents in this study exhibited several strengths throughout the migration experience, including strong social support characterized by their connection with family members and friends in both communities (transnationalism), local support that provided information about resources and job opportunities, internal assets such as a positive attitude and disposition toward facing challenges, and a belief in a better future for the parents and their children. This is in agreement with the notion of family resilience (Walsh, 2003), in which *hope* is conceptualized as belief in a better future and is one of the key processes of family resilience. A shared *hope* for a better future among parents empowers families (Walsh, 2003).

This study did not intend to overgeneralize the findings to all recent immigrants, nor did it attempt to diminish the stressful experiences of immigrant parents and their high level of challenges. In addition, the study did not attempt to capture the overall parenting experience of recent immigrant parents of young children. However, the findings here should be comprehended as an effort to highlight the concept of human agency, placing immigrant parents as active agents continually planning for and seeking better opportunities. This approach emphasizes that immigrant parents are active participants, capable of reflecting and adjusting to environmental demands. The perceived successful adjustment must be

understood within the lens of their strengths, such as *internal resources* that include their *attitude, motivation, belief, and perception of challenges as opportunities for growth* (Hovey, 2000; Kim, 2015), and the maximization of their external resources to meet family responsibilities. It is important to mention that although previous studies found that immigrants generally encounter discrimination, a lack of access to quality medical care and housing, employment-related challenges, and difficulties receiving services, it should be remembered that not all states, counties, communities, neighborhoods, and persons are alike; some environments are more tolerant, receptive, and friendly than others.

Implications

This study is novel in that it reports on recent immigrant parents with young children. The study underscores the parents' sense of adjustment, reflected in their perceived children's well-being (e.g., access to free education and health care), family togetherness, and financial betterment, and their sense of control over their new environment. The study benefits new initiatives when culturally specific educational programs focusing on family strengths for recent immigrant families are being developed, as well as when service providers and family life educators are working with immigrant parents raising young children.

Implications for Practice

For practitioners and outreach coordinators working with recent immigrants lacking strong social capital, connecting and creating a network for them may serve as a buffer in the adjustment process. When adjustment processes among recent immigrant parents are being evaluated, the presence of an informal support network needs to be taken into account as an external resource that might explain family adaptability and functionality. This social capital allows families to establish a network of information and resources that benefits the family as a whole (Concha, Sanchez, Rosa & Villar, 2013; Delgado-Gaitan, 2001). One way of creating community ties and social capital is by organizing social events and activities for families and children.

Implications for Research

Immigrant families' anticipation of time in residence in the United States (temporary vs. permanent) plays a pivotal role because of its direct impact on the level of acculturation, child-rearing practices, perception of adjustment, and long-term psychological well-being of immigrant parents (Martinez et al., 2011). Therefore, additional studies are needed to explore

parents' anticipated length of stay, expectations, and a priori expectations of future challenges in the sending communities in relation to their level of acculturative stress, ethnic identity, and family cohesion (Dillon, De la Rosa, & Ibanez, 2013; Leong, Park, & Kalibatseva, 2013). Further inquiry is needed to closely examine how these families continue to cope with daily challenges and the implications that these coping mechanisms have for the parenting system. Particularly, the literature will benefit from studies that thoroughly analyze coping resources such as psychosocial and social support (instrumental, emotional, informative) and immigrant psychological resilience over time. For example, a longitudinal study would make it possible to follow changes and patterns over time in relation to parental self-efficacy, psychological well-being, and coping strategies.

In summary, the present study supports the need to focus on immigrant families' strengths and to place them as agents actively evaluating, planning, and taking action while reflecting on their internal and external resources. The adjustment process of recent immigrants can be understood if their strengths are recognized and valued.

Limitations and Strengths

The findings of this study cannot be generalized to other first-generation immigrant parents in the United States. Unique life experiences and circumstances (e.g., having a child with special needs, receiving local services, and having a strong social network) vary among immigrant families. Owing to the qualitative nature of the study's approach, no conclusion is possible regarding the longitudinal stability of the parents' sense of well-being. At the same time, the study has an important strength. The sample included both fathers and mothers, adding further support to the overall sense of family well-being from the point of view of both parents. Lastly, this study supports the validity of using a qualitative approach to explore unmapped family processes and cultural practices in ethnically diverse families. This approach provides the opportunity to listen to participants' life stories and represent them from their perspective.

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