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Becoming an American Parent

Overcoming Challenges and Finding Strength in a New Immigrant Latino Community

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One in five children living in the United States is an immigrant or a child of an immigrant, and 62% of these children are Latino. Through qualitative methods, this study identifies ways that Latino immigrant parents with adolescent children cope with their new environment and how that environment shapes their parenting practices. Two primary themes emerge: overcoming new challenges and finding new strengths. Immigrant parents discuss the challenges of overcoming fears of the unknown; navigating unfamiliar work, school, and neighborhood environments; encountering and confronting racism; and losing family connections and other forms of social capital. In response to these challenges, immigrant parents discuss developing bicultural coping skills, increasing parent–child communication, empathizing with and respecting their adolescent children, and fostering social supports. The results fit well with a risk and protective factor framework and provide a basis for improving policies and programs to support effective parenting in Latino immigrant families.

Keywords: *Mexican; Latino; immigrants; parenting; child development*

At the turn of the 21st century, Latinos became the largest minority group living in the United States, and Latino youth became the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population under 18 years of age (Ramirez & de la Cruz, 2003; U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). The majority of these Latino youth are the first-generation or second-generation children of immigrants (Hernandez, 1997; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Given these demographic trends, practitioners and researchers in several fields (e.g., education, health, psychology, public policy, and social work) have become increasingly interested in

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understanding the normative behaviors and adaptive strategies of Latino parents and the developmental outcomes of their children.

Using qualitative methods, this analysis explores the ways in which Latinos describe their migration and acculturation experiences in relation to their role as parents in one of the fastest growing new immigrant–receiving communities in the United States—North Carolina. Through our research, we develop a model of risk and resiliency that incorporates the culture and diversity of Latino immigrant families. Our model describes factors that influence acculturative stress and intergenerational conflict in Latino immigrant families and parents' cultural adaptations to life in the United States. Based on our analysis, we identify a wide array of intervention points that may enhance clinicians' abilities to work constructively with Latino parents and youth. As a result, this analysis provides new insights that researchers can use in developing community programs and therapeutic interventions that support the transitions of Latino immigrant youth and their families to the United States.

We begin our analysis with a brief discussion of previous research and theory that informed the development of this study. Next, we provide descriptive data on our informants and information on our recruitment, interview, and analytic process. Third, the results of our qualitative analysis are presented. And last, we discuss the implications of our research for theory, policy, and practice.

Previous Research and Theoretical Considerations

Previous research on immigrant families has been criticized for failing to examine the roles that contextual, racial, and cultural factors play in the formation of parenting strategies and child development (Garcia Coll & Szalacha, 2004; Harrison, Wilson, Pine, Chan, & Buriel, 1990; Harwood, Leyendecker,

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Carlson, Asencio, & Miller, 2002). Research on parenting and child development in minority and immigrant families has been stunted by a comparative paradigm that sees children of color and children of immigrants as biologically or culturally deficient and contrasts their development with U.S.-born, White children. Few researchers have examined normative parenting practices and development in minority and immigrant families.

Responding to these criticisms, Garcia Coll and her colleagues (1996) developed an integrative model for the study of developmental competencies in minority children. Their model integrates ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986) with social stratification theory (Tumin, 1967) in an attempt to describe the process by which macrosocial factors influence parenting and developmental processes in children of color and children of immigrant families.

According to this model, societal, family, and child factors mutually influence one another and the child's developmental competencies. Societal factors include social position (e.g., race, ethnicity, class, and gender); racism manifested in prejudice, discrimination, and oppression; segregation (e.g., residential, economic, social, and psychological); and promoting and inhibiting environments (e.g., neighborhoods, schools, and health care). Family factors include family structures and roles; family values, beliefs, and goals; racial socialization within the family; and family socioeconomic resources. Child factors include age, gender, temperament, health status, and physical characteristics. At the interface of these three factors is an adaptive culture that involves a social system that differs from the dominant culture. It is through the development of an adaptive culture that immigrant families manage diversity and the differential access to resources that accompanies their social positions.

Among Latino immigrants, the broader context of reception into their new communities shapes the societal factors that influence their adaptation and parenting (González, 2001; Matute-Bianchi, 1986; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Thus, differences in the context of reception lead to the development of unique ecological niches that mold the values, beliefs, and practices of parents and modify the success of these practices in helping adolescents transition into adulthood (Dumka, Roosa, & Jackson, 1997; Hill, Bush, & Roosa, 2003; Reese, 2002; Vega, 1990).

Previous qualitative studies of Latino immigrant parents have focused on their experiences within two key institutions shaping the context of reception—schools and health systems. However, they do not provide an integrated view of acculturation process through the eyes of parents. Examining the school context, researchers have found that schools divide students by race and gender and distribute opportunities among students in a way that reproduces

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social inequalities (Conchas, 2001; Williams, Alvarez, & Hauck, 2002). The result can be a school culture that marginalizes immigrant youth and devalues the culture and ideals of their parents (Greenfield, Quiroz, & Raeff, 2000; Valenzuela, 1999b). This process of marginalization within the school can reduce not only access to resources that would enhance a student's academic performance but also a student's motivation and their parents' expectations for success in school (Goldenberg, Gallimore, Reese, & Garnier, 2001; Goyette & Conchas, 2002). Latino immigrant parents have been found to react to the marginalization of their children in schools through a combination of accommodation and resistance (Ochoa, 2000; Olmedo, 2003). They become more involved in school activities to monitor teacher performance and their children; they organize their community to protect school resources that they value; and they assert their authority and cultural values at home.

In the health care context, Latino immigrant parents have reported on the challenges of accessing care and on experiences with health care providers that further marginalize them (Bender, Harbour, Thorp, & Morris, 2001; Clark, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999a). These challenges include difficulties in arranging transportation to health care clinics, finding Spanish-speaking providers, and finding providers who will treat them with the *personalismo* or warmth that makes them feel welcome and accepted. When providers do not take time to listen to mothers' concerns about their children and fail to discuss or explain treatment options, Latina mothers presume that they are being discriminated against and that poor quality of care is being provided.

Additionally, research on parenting and child development in Latino immigrant families has focused on the relationship between family factors and adaptive cultures. The primary family factor of interest has been the intergenerational conflicts that can occur as a result of dissonant acculturation processes in parents and their children. Dissonant acculturation outcomes can rupture family ties, result in a loss of parental authority, and lead to role reversals in which the child becomes a culture broker for his or her parents (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). The stress of intergenerational conflict can be seriously exacerbated in immigrant families, in which adolescent rebellion is unanticipated and younger family members are exposed, through school and other social outlets, to norms and expectations that differ radically from those of their parents (Szapocznik & Williams, 2000; Zayas & Solari, 1994). A potential result is increasing disengagement and rigidity in parent–child relationships that previously had been flexible and cohesive (Gil & Vega, 1996; Szapocznik & Williams, 2000).

Given the focus on intergenerational conflict in the literature, it is no surprise that clinicians and policy makers often emphasize acculturation

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differences between parents and offspring as an explanation for difficulties and a target point for intervention. However, both consonant and selective acculturation processes can also occur in immigrant families. Immigrant parents may accompany and monitor their children through the acculturation process and, supported by a coethnic community, may promote the partial retention of their home language and cultural norms (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). For these families and for those experiencing dissonant acculturation, factors other than intergenerational conflict may be the primary sources of stress and may contribute to challenges in parenting. Although few empirical studies of her model have been conducted, Garcia Coll et al.'s (1996) integrative model provides insights into what these other factors may be.

In terms of adaptive cultures in Latino immigrant families, researchers have focused on the protective qualities of *respecto* and *familismo* (Buriel, 1993; Harwood et al., 2002; Olmedo, 2003; Villenas, 2001). *Respecto*, or respect, refers to the importance of teaching children the proper level of courtesy and decorum required in various social contexts with people of a particular age, sex, and social status. *Familismo*, or familism, refers to "feelings of loyalty, reciprocity, and solidarity towards members of the family, as well as the notion of the family as an extension of self" (Cortes, 1995, p. 249). Both have been associated with improvements in the physical health, emotional health, and educational well-being of adolescent Latinos (Bird et al., 2001; Dumka et al., 1997; Fuligni, 2001; Hill et al., 2003).

As discussed below, our research shows that *respecto* and *familismo* are only two components of the adaptive culture that Latino immigrant parents develop to translate risks into resiliencies. Rather than being overcome by the changes in their social positions, by economic and social stratification, and by inhibiting environments, Latino immigrant parents overcome them with uniquely tailored parenting strategies that support the developmental competencies of their children.

Method

Informants

An extremely heterogeneous group, Latinos include persons of various racial and socioeconomic backgrounds from more than 20 countries of origin (Harwood et al., 2002). They differ substantially in terms of the historical and personal circumstances of their arrivals to the United States, their levels of acculturation to the United States, and their experiences with the local communities in which they settle (Garcia, 2001; Massey, Durand, & Malone,

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2002; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Vega, 1990). Our data consist of 18 interviews with first-generation Latino immigrant parents living in North Carolina. North Carolina's Latino population grew 394% from 77,000 in 1990 to 379,000 in 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). In 2000, it was the fastest growing Latino immigrant community in the United States and reflected a new trend in the demography of immigration—settlement in the South, Midwest, and mountainous regions of the United States (Johnson, Johnson-Webb, & Farrell, 1999).

Although Latinos in North Carolina are more likely to be recent immigrants, on average, their demographic characteristics are similar to Latinos living in other parts of the United States (see Ramirez & de la Cruz, 2003, and Suro & Passel, 2003, for comprehensive reviews). The majority of North Carolina's Latino population is foreign born (61%), male (60%), under age 25 (53%), and of Mexican heritage (65%). They speak only Spanish (82%) and have not completed high school by age 25 (55%). Given these labor market disadvantages, it is not surprising to find a high unemployment rate (8%), high poverty rate (25%), and low rate of health insurance (46%) within North Carolina's Latino immigrant population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001).

The characteristics of the Latino parents we interviewed were quite similar to those of the average Latino family in North Carolina. The majority of the parents interviewed were mothers (83%) who were married or living with a partner (80%). Most (61%) of our parents and children had moved to the United States from Mexico within the past 5 years (Table 1). Four were from Colombia; two were from Argentina; and one was from El Salvador. Despite their limited time in the United States, 28% of the children and 17% of their parents identified as bicultural on the 10-item Psychological Acculturation Scale (Tropp, Coll, Alarcon, & Vazquez Garcia, 1999). Several had lived in traditional receiving communities in California, New York, New Jersey, Texas, or Florida prior to moving to North Carolina. The ages of our parental respondents varied from 30 to 51 years, with a mean age of 39 years. Their adolescent children varied in age from 12 to 17 years with a mean age of 14 years. Although many (57%) had not completed high school and spoke little or no English, most of the mothers interviewed worked in the service sector as housekeepers, child care providers, and nurse's aides. Their partners and the fathers interviewed also tended to work in the service sector but as manual laborers (e.g., gardeners, painters, carpenters). They reported earning an average of $1,855 per month but indicated that their earnings varied significantly throughout the year. As a result, their annual incomes were typically below $20,000. Given that the families were supporting at least 4 persons

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Table 1
Key Characteristics of Informants ($N = 18$)

Characteristic	
Mother interviewed	83%
Daughter interviewed	61%
Mean age of parents	39 years
Mean age of daughters or sons	14 years
Mother graduated from high school	57%
Parent worked in the service sector	94%
Parent from Mexico	61%
Parent bicultural on Psychological Acculturation Scale	17%
Youth bicultural on Psychological Acculturation Scale	28%
Youth immigrated within the past 5 years	56%

Note: To protect the confidentiality of participants, only summary characteristics are provided.

with this income, nearly all of them lived at or near the federal poverty level ($18,392 for a family of 4) in 2002.

Procedures

Our informants were recruited through two Latino community organizations and through snowball sampling techniques. Participants chose whether they would like to be interviewed at home or in a local community center and whether to be interviewed in English or Spanish. All respondents chose to have the interviews conducted in Spanish at their homes. Three interviewers were involved in the process: Two were native Spanish speakers, and all were bicultural. The qualitative interviews were audiotaped and lasted 1.5 to 2 hours each. Active consent was obtained, and each informant received $20 in appreciation for the time spent interviewing. After the completion of each interview, interviewers simultaneously transcribed and translated their interviews into English. Given differences in Spanish dialect across countries, translations and interpretations of interviews were completed with careful attention to word choice and concepts that vary across Spanish-speaking countries.

Our 18 in-depth interviews with Latino parents were conducted as part of a larger study that included in-depth interviews with one adolescent child of each parent and the completion of a survey that included questions on socioeconomic background, acculturation, and mental health. Informants completed the survey component after the completion of the in-depth interview.

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Table 2
Key Question Prompts

1.	What motivated your family to move to the United States?
2.	What was life like for you and your family before you moved to the United States?
3.	Tell me about your journey to the United States.
4.	What is your first memory of being in the states?
5.	What do you like most (least) about living here in North Carolina?
6.	Tell me about your child's experience with the school system in North Carolina.
7.	Tell me about your child's experience with the health care system in North Carolina.
8.	Have you noticed any changes in your child since you moved here?
9.	What type of advice would you give a parent who was moving to the United States from your home country?

To prompt descriptions of daily life, we used nine questions (Table 2). From these descriptions, we learned about our informants' lived experiences.

By listening to our informants tell their stories, we gained insight into the process of becoming a Latino immigrant parent in the United States. The qualitative research process allowed our informants to teach us, from their perspective, about the issues and concerns of greatest relevance to their lives. They contextualized their immigration experiences for us and informed us about what systems were most helpful to them, what struggles were the most difficult or the most easily overcome, and how parents and youth saw their relationships with one another.

Taking an essentially phenomenological approach (Holstein & Gubrium, 1994), our data collection was characterized by a conversation-like interaction between the interviewer and the informant that allowed for reflection on the part of both. Our analytic process focused on identifying recurrent themes and comparing and contrasting the experiences of informants (Omery, 1983; Tesch, 1990). Through this process, the overarching theme of changes in the parental role in response to immigration emerged. We then began comparing the interviews for similar themes and coding the interviews. This coding was done independently among the three authors of this article. First, two authors coded the interviews independently. They then compared their coding for each interview and agreed on important subthemes. This was presented to the third investigator who reread the interviews, asked for additional clarification, or noted other themes or quotes that either supported or contradicted previous themes. A final round of review focused on interrelationships between the themes and correspondence with theoretical frameworks regarding parenting and child development in minority families.

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Two of the three coders were bilingual, bicultural Latinas actively engaged in the local Latino community. They represented immigration and mental health researchers in psychology, public policy, and social work. In this way, we used our multiple perspectives to create "observer triangulation" and "interdisciplinary triangulation" to heighten the rigor of the analysis (Padgett, 1998, pp. 96-97).

Results

Combining a risk and protective factor framework (Garmezy, 1993) with Garcia Coll et al.'s (1996) integrative model, Figure 1 depicts the process of becoming an American parent experienced by Latino immigrant families. The process begins with the decision to migrate. Parents have goals and values for their children that cannot be fulfilled in their home countries because of societal factors such as poverty and war. So they choose to migrate. After migration, the process of becoming an American parent continues, as parents confront a change in social position that includes the loss of social support networks, the loss of social status or class, and the loss of familiar social roles. The change in social position associated with migration leads to levels of economic and social segregation that many immigrant families have not experienced in their home countries. In their new homes, immigrant families encounter economic and racial diversity, confront racism, and contend with the fear and uncertainty associated with making a home in a new world. The change in social position and the economic and social segregations associated with these changes become most palpable, as children and their parents interact with institutions (especially school and health) in their new environments. Although navigating new social contexts may feel risky to immigrant parents and their children, they may also find rewards in these new contexts and actively seek and foster institutional support systems. Thus, immigrant families actively reshape their environment. It is through reshaping the environment and adapting their parenting strategies to their new social contexts that immigrant parents help their children thrive. Positive coping and adaptive parenting was demonstrated in high levels of empathy for their adolescent children, a willingness to seek help from nontraditional sources, and attempts to instill pride and knowledge of their Latino heritage in their adolescents.

Immigration as a Parenting Decision

Theories of migration focus on immigration as an economic decision aimed at improving individual or household wealth and supported by social

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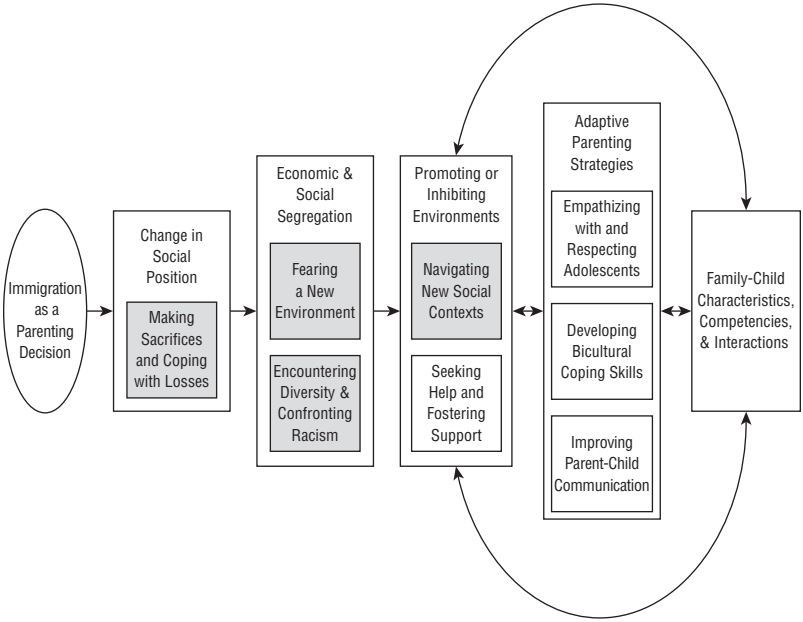
Figure 1
Becoming an American Parent: A Risk-Resiliency Framework for Latino Immigrants



Source: This framework is an adaptation of the integrative model for the study of developmental competencies in minority youth (Garcia-Coll et al., 1996).
Note: Challenges and risks reported by immigrant parents are shaded in gray. Protective factors that promote resilience are not shaded.

and structural forces that reduce the challenges of migration and increase the expected gains from migration (Massey et al., 2002). Our interviews demonstrated that at least for Latino immigrants with children, the decision to immigrate could also be understood as a parenting decision. Nearly three quarters ($N = 13$) of our informants spontaneously mentioned at least one aspect of parenting when asked "What motivated your family to move to this country?" The major parenting themes that initially resonated with respondents as they discussed their motivations to immigrate to the United States included helping their children to obtain a better education, to secure a better economic future, to grow up in a safer environment, and to reconnect with family (Table 3).

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Table 3
Immigration as a Parenting Decision:
Major Themes and Repeated ideas ($N = 13$)

Themes		Percentages
A.	Obtain a better education	62
	1. Creating an opportunity for their children to obtain more schooling	
	2. Helping their children to learn English	
B.	Secure a better economic future	31
	1. Helping their children escape poverty	
	2. To get better jobs	
	3. To get more money to pay for educational expenses	
C.	Grow up in a safer environment	31
	1. Fear of their children being robbed or physically assaulted	
	2. Concern about their children becoming warriors or guerillas	
	3. Protecting children from domestic violence	
D.	Reconnect the family	15
	1. Children want to be with the father in the United States	

Note: Percentages sum to more than 100 because some parents brought up more than one theme within this construct.

Exemplifying migration as a parenting decision aimed at securing a better education and economic future for her children, a Mexican mother explained,

> In our country, it would be difficult for them to be able to study in the university. So the motivation for our move was my kids. So that they could study.

Exemplifying the quest for physical security for children, a Colombian woman stated with nervous laughter,

> I have a niece, and oh my God, I don't want her to grow up over there. If it were for me, I'd bring my entire family here! Oh my God! The adolescents, my God, are very dangerous! It's a war of complete distrust of everyone. We just count on ourselves. It's not that adolescents are bad, but it's the internal condition of living: no work, no opportunities, poor education, expensive education, no respect for private space, and saddest of all, no compassion for people.

Several of the immigrant parents interviewed for our study had been separated from their children for months or years. In some cases, children were

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left in their home countries while the parents initiated the migration process. In other cases, children moved to the United States and stayed with extended family or a father before the mother and other children followed. Thus, as parents and their children are adjusting to life in the United States, they are also adjusting to each other (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001).

Emphasizing family reunification as a primary motivation for their move to the United States, one 42-year-old mother explained her decision to come despite her husband's discouragement. She said,

> He told us that we would have a lot of problems here because of the language. The children would have to adapt. I would have to find a job. . . . And I still said, 'No. I want to come,' because it had been such a long time since we had seen him.

A statement by a younger mother reflected this same sentiment:

> When my husband would come visit us every 3 or 4 months and he would leave, [my daughters] would cry. They would tell him, "I will go with you Daddy. I will go with you." And so when my family would make comments that I could not come here, that I would never have a complete home like my father's other daughters, that is what drove me to say, "I am going." And I decided to come.

As the interviews progressed, all of our respondents eventually discussed one or more aspects of their migration and acculturation experiences in relation to their roles as parents. Following inspection, these could be categorized as aspects of immigrant parenting that required overcoming new challenges or finding new strengths.

Overcoming Challenges

Although the journey to the United States began with hope for their economic futures and the futures of their children, the realities of immigration took root quickly. Nearly all of our respondents reported facing tremendous challenges as they began to help their children navigate their new environments and cope with significant personal losses and unexpected changes in family roles and responsibilities (Table 4). Many (67%) of our informants also discussed facing these challenges while struggling through generalized anxiety regarding their new living environment and its effects on their children. For more than half (56%) of our informants, one particularly salient aspect of the new environment was race and ethnicity. For the first

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Table 4
Overcoming New Challenges: Major Themes and Repeated Ideas ($N = 18$)

Themes	Percentages
A. Navigating new social contexts	100
1. Learning English	
2. Building community with Americans	
3. Coping with the U.S. school system	
4. Finding health care for children	
5. Balancing work and family	
B. Coping with loss and family change	89
1. Losing family connections	
2. Changing family roles and responsibilities	
3. Changing social status	
4. Breaking traditions and clashing values	
C. Fearing a new environment	67
1. General anxiety	
2. Alcohol, tobacco, and drugs	
3. Delinquency and crime	
4. Unknown friends and parents	
5. Sexual liberalism	
D. Encountering diversity and confronting racism	56
1. Interacting with African Americans	
2. Facing Hispanic/Latino stereotypes	
3. Discovering socioeconomic differences in the United States	

Note: Percentages sum to more than 100 because some parents brought up more than one theme within this construct.

time, our informants were interacting with African Americans and confronting negative U.S. social stereotypes of Latinos.

Navigating New Social Contexts

As parents discussed their migration and acculturation experiences, they focused on the challenges of learning a new language and building community with Americans. The difficulty of learning a new language and culture were coupled with the challenges associated with navigating the U.S. school and health care systems and balancing work and family.

Language. In helping their children navigate a new world, parents must first overcome the language barrier. Without the ability to communicate,

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parents felt helpless, alienated, and unable to advocate on behalf of their children. A well-educated Argentinean mother commenting on her first memory of the United States said, "I didn't understand anything completely—nothing. That put me in a type of jail, you know. I couldn't communicate for the first time in my life. It was like I wasn't a part of this society."

The language barrier became increasingly palpable, as parents sought to help their children do their homework and navigate the school system. As one Mexican mother commented, "Well, basically, when she started elementary school. It was a little hard because P's first language was Spanish. In that time, I did not speak English to help her." As children learn English in school, they sometimes come to resent their parents' Spanish monolingualism or become embarrassed by their parents. One mother explained to us,

> Oh, yes, when [my daughter] started going to school, that was when she started learning English. . . . Her problem was that she would come home and she would start to talking to me in English, and I would say, "Speak Spanish." And she would say, "Why, if I don't need it?" She started rebelling, like saying, "Oh no. I don't want to speak Spanish." . . . And she would say, "Mommy, why can't Daddy go to the [school] conferences? It is that I don't want you to go." And so for me, it was not hard. It was extremely hard. Because I would feel really badly, really badly. . . . And I would say, "Daughter, I am your mother.". . . There was a time, when she was already about 8 years old . . . that she wanted to run away from home to live with her friend because her friend had an American mom, and I was a Hispanic mom.

Community. As they continued their struggle with the language, parents explained that they began to struggle with the culture as well. Without a sense of community and without knowing the parents of their children's friends, they did not feel safe allowing their children to attend friends' parties, to attend sleepovers, or to go to the movies with their peers. One mother expressed the sentiments of many of our informants, saying,

> In Mexico, I knew all the families of my son's friends. I knew the mothers, the fathers, and even some of the grandparents. I had visited their homes and they, ours. Here, it's different. I don't know the families of his friends.

The dispersed nature of communities in the United States and the challenges of using public transportation in the United States contributed to our parents' sense of the lack of community. Most of our parents were accustomed to communities where walking around town was the norm. Without

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owning a car or having the ability to drive, parents felt trapped and unable to help their children take advantage of community-based resources.

School. For most immigrant parents and children, the school is their first institutional contact in the United States. Within schools, youth become exposed to the native culture for the first time, interact with immigrant and native children of their same ethnicity, and form beliefs about what society and persons outside of their family expect from them. Those beliefs and expectations are communicated to immigrant parents and become a part of parents' acculturation experiences as well.

Parents had positive impressions of their children's schools when teachers had high expectations for their children, called to discuss a child's progress, and had access to interpreters. A Mexican mother captured this type of positive experience, saying,

> For me, [the schooling experience] is very good, because when the children are late with assignments or miss school, they call immediately. If school starts at 8 am, by 8:30 a.m. they have called, "Your child—why didn't he come to school?" Or they talk to you about assignments, "Why is your child afraid? Why doesn't your child participate?" All of this—they are very interested. They get very involved with the family. . . . When I have had problems with the children at school, they look for an interpreter for me. I have had a lot of help with people translating for me about what my children's problems were at school. . . . I have had luck that there have been people there who have helped me.

Parents had negative experiences when Spanish–English interpreters were not available, when school administrators or teachers did not explain requirements for successful completion of a grade, and when their children's peers communicated negative stereotypes about Latino immigrants. Explaining his frustration with poor communication between his family and school administrators, a father related his experience:

> This is a long story. She was advised by someone in the main office (I have the person's name) to register for ESL classes. "Take all ESL classes your first year," that's what she was told. That made sense. You must first learn English so that you can continue your studies in English. What we didn't know is that she would repeat her 9th year. She lost the entire year. The ESL classes replaced her requirements for that year. The problem we have is that no one explained this to us at the beginning. We found out when the report card

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> arrived at the end of the school year. . . . We weren't informed. [My wife] who speaks English, called the school a few times about something else, but nothing was said to us. They must have known this at the beginning, when they advised her. Being immigrants is hard this way. We are here for our children's future, but the school doesn't explain to us the important decision they made. Not even [our daughter] knew she wasn't going to pass the grade.

Describing her child's experiences with discrimination in the schools, a mother said,

> For both [of my children] there was discrimination. From the Americans, the Blacks. . . . Above all, they had a lot of problems on the bus, because [the Blacks] would bother them or say things to them. They would even talk among themselves, "Look at those poor Hispanics."

Health. Although not as significant as the school environment for most parents, contact with the health care system also shapes their acculturation experiences. In our very first interview, one mother expressed a sentiment that was repeated throughout the rest of the study.

> Thank God we have not had sickness. . . . I pray to God that my children don't get sick because here, getting sick would be terrible. In my country, no, because she was covered by health insurance for everything. Not here. This frightens me.

Although immigrant parents recognized that high-quality medical care was available for children in the United States, they felt that cost made this care inaccessible to their children and worried about their children getting seriously ill. Even when affordable care was available to children, parents reported difficulties scheduling appointments. Appointments were canceled frequently, and a visit to the doctor's office sometimes required taking a full day off of work or school to wait to be seen.

Work. Finally, a few immigrant parents expressed a concern with finding the appropriate balance between work and family. Although parents recognized that time spent working was not spent with their children, the economic necessities of their lives prevented them from finding more of a balance. Parents expressing this sentiment sometimes blamed themselves for conflicts with their adolescent children and the delinquent behaviors of other adolescents. For example, a mother working as a housekeeper said,

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> If [parents] are going to bring [their kids] over here, [I'd advise the parents] to pay attention to them, spend more time with them. . . . Sometimes [teenage pregnancy and drug use] is your fault for not paying attention to them. Sometimes you only put effort into your work, work, work. And you forget that you are a mother, that you are a father. . . . You displace your family because you have so much work. Sometimes parents even have two jobs, and they don't spend any time with their kids. And when you turn around, your home has been destroyed, your kids are destroyed.

Coping With Loss and Family Change

Parents' comments regarding the challenges of balancing work and family in the United States begin to suggest that the loss of extended family connections and changes in the family dynamic may be among the most significant aspects of an immigrant parent's migration and acculturation experience. When asked what she liked least about living in the United States, one mother cried with tremendous grief,

> Missing my family. That is very difficult. My sons, my grandchildren, my aunts, uncles, their children. I've also left my fiancé. He promises me that he will come here, but it's been very difficult for him to legally enter this country. My son is probably going to marry soon. He has a serious girlfriend. They're all over there. It's very difficult.

As they coped with their grief and their loss of family connections, our informants also coped with changes in their living arrangements, changes in socioeconomic status, changes in their roles and responsibilities within the family, and changes in the traditions and values being adopted by their children. These changes magnified their sense of loss and sacrifice. Thinking of changes in her living arrangements and social status as she moved to the United States, a mother working in child care remarked,

> In Colombia, we had a very high social status. My husband worked at the university. I, too, worked at the university. We had very good jobs. We had an apartment. . . . We had our own cars. We had servants in our home. We had children in private schools. It was high status. . . . We use to have a beautiful, modern house. My children had their own rooms. Here, the three of us live in one bedroom of someone else's house. We sleep in one bed. We use to have separate beds. . . . Adjusting to what we don't have anymore is still difficult. But, it was traumatic when we first moved here.

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Several other parents echoed these sentiments as they discussed the challenges of living with extended family members and the lack of privacy in their current living situations. In the words of a mother from Mexico, "We want to live alone. That would be best. But right now, we can't."

Living in close quarters and with limited economic resources may accentuate the stresses experienced by parents and children as they contend with changing family roles and responsibilities. In some cases, fathers began taking more responsibility for some aspects of parenting because they had lived in the United States longer and spoke more English. As one mother explained to us,

> The one who goes to meetings here, who takes care of everything, is my husband. In Colombia, it was me. In Colombia, it was me who went to the meetings and got involved in everything at the children's schools and everything. But here, it is my husband.

In other cases, informants focused on changes in the relationships between themselves and their children and changes in the expectations that they had for their children. They identified a level of assertiveness and independence in their children that was attributed to both the resourcefulness of their children in acculturating to the United States and their children's greater level of acculturation to U.S. norms for teenagers.

As exemplified by one father's comment, these changes were sometimes viewed with pride:

> When we came from New York, I would ask her, "Daughter, come and help me call this store." And she did not have the courage. And now, yes. Whatever I don't know, she knows. She can get by [on her own] now. . . . She has matured a lot in the past 2 years. I think the changes in this country have pushed her to more maturity.

In other cases, this newfound assertiveness and independence in their children was characterized negatively, as rebelliousness that goes beyond what would have been expected in their home countries. Concerns about the growing independence or rebelliousness of their children were sometimes linked to parents' concerns about children losing their cultural heritage and adopting American values and behaviors. Thinking about a recent argument with her daughter about going to a sleepover, one mother explained,

> She and I have very different beliefs, in terms of outings, in terms of school. . . . I get nervous because these types of things don't happen in Mexico.

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Similarly another mother talked to us about changes she had noted in her daughters attitude.

> She doesn't want to eat tortillas. She just wants to eat bread. She wants to think like people here do, like Americans. . . . Like, she tells me that I shouldn't let my husband tell me, "Do this for me. Bring me that." Or "Bring everything close to me." She says, "No Mom. You shouldn't do it. So that he also has to do things too." I say, "No. That's impossible, because that is the way things are there. That is the way it is in Mexico."

Fearing a New Environment

At times, concerns about their children losing their cultural heritages or adopting American values and behaviors were expressed as generalized anxiety or specific fears about life in the United States. Expressions of generalized anxiety included comments about the potential dangers of allowing children in the United States to stay out late at night; attend parties with U.S.-born friends; and become exposed to the types of violence that parents had seen on television, read about in the paper, or heard about from others. Despite seeing the United States as a land of better opportunities and futures for their children, many parents also viewed the United States as a potentially toxic environment (Garbarino, 1995). They felt that constant vigilance was necessary to ensure that their children were not exposed to possible dangers. Emblematic of the general anxiety felt by immigrant parents, one mother said,

> I don't feel safe even leaving my kids at a day care, because I have seen so much injustice. So much. . . . That is why I have always preferred to work at night. So that during the day I can care for my kids and at night my husband watches them. That is what we all do, the majority of Hispanics.

Specific fears focused on how their children's bad friends might encourage their child to take up illicit drugs, skip school, take part in gang activities, or become pregnant. One mother confided,

> I'm most concerned about his American friends. I don't even know their families. I've seen some of the boys, some of them. I worry that my son will pick up the customs of the Americans here. You know, using drugs, becoming too independent. That is what most worries me.

Encountering and Confronting Racism

To some extent, the concerns and fears expressed by Latino immigrant parents may result from their first encounters with other races and their first

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experiences as a minority in the United States. Explicitly commenting on the socioeconomic and ethnic heterogeneity of the United States, one mother said,

> [In Colombian schools], the groups were very homogenous. And here, the groups are different. The kids from different cultures and different socioeconomic classes are suffering.

For other immigrant parents, comments were more explicitly focused on racism and discrimination. When asked what they liked least about the United States and when asked about their experiences with school and health systems, more than half of our informants mentioned at least one aspect of racism and discrimination. They had personally experienced racism or discrimination; internalized racist remarks; or expressed racist sentiments toward other Latino immigrants and other ethnic groups, especially African Americans.

Children typically experienced racism or discrimination at school and communicated this to their parents. One parent discussed how an African American boy had teased her son on the bus until they had a fistfight. Another described how her daughter had witnessed a group of African American boys beating up a Latina girl. Other parents explained how both White and African American peers ostracized their Latino children at school.

While children experienced racism at school, parents experienced racism at work. One parent shared,

> When I arrived, I worked in a restaurant first. I worked in a lot of different places. And a lot of people thought that because I did not speak English, I had to earn less money. . . . It was with African Americans that I had these experiences. They were like a little indifferent, something like that. . . . They told me, "If you had stayed in your own country, you would not have to be here struggling." They told me this in a warm way. But they said, "If you had stayed in your own country, you would be doing well, speaking your own language. Because [you're] here, you have to learn English, and you have to work. And that job could be better done by someone from here." Well, I was thinking, "Oh my God. I don't understand the directions well, and a Black person told me, if you had not come you would not be going through this; that job would be done by someone else." And he told me that again. And I did not say anything because I was scared of losing my job.

After both experiencing racism for themselves and observing racist interactions between others, parents and children began internalizing racist attitudes toward other Latinos. As an example of this, one parent explained how her boys had become selective in choosing Latino friends:

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> [My boys] don't want to hang out with Hispanics, especially those who only waste their time, or those that dress badly. . . . I notice that they are prejudiced against even Hispanics who dress like this [really loose pants worn down under the bottom]. And so I have said to them, it's one thing to dress like that, but what [the Hispanics] feel and think is something else. But they say that they see how [the Hispanics] behave in school and they prefer not to socialize with them. So they do have Hispanic friends, but they are very highly selected. Those who do well in school and behave . . . or those that speak English really well or those born here.

Parents and children also began adopting racist viewpoints, especially toward African Americans. As one father described his initial living experience in North Carolina, he said,

> [The apartment] was really small, and well, here we had plenty of problems. . . . Over there [in Argentina], we are used to treating everyone the same, in a friendly manner. So we let [the Black kids] in. But they knew no limits. . . . One day they broke the door, and they came in. They hit my daughter. And we realized that we needed to interact differently. That it was different [in the United States]. And that is how we became aware of these cultural issues personally.

In other studies, immigrant parents have recounted similar experiences navigating new social contexts (Bender et al., 2001; Clark, 2002; Olmedo, 2003), coping with loss and family change (Williams et al., 2002), fearing a new environment (Cooper, 2005; Reese, 2002), and encountering and confronting racism (Conchas, 2001; Ochoa, 2000; Williams et al., 2002). When children express embarrassment about their parents' English-language skills and cultural heritage, parents feel disrespected. When teachers, school administrators, or health care providers fail to communicate with them, parents feel marginalized and disenfranchised. When the demands of work combine with the absence of strong kinship networks in their new homes, parents feel overwhelmed. Coupled with the perceived dangers of the U.S. environment and negative influences of U.S. peers, immigrant parents adapt by limiting their children's activities and controlling their friendships more than they might have in their home countries (Reese, 2002). As described below, immigrant parents also adapt by empowering themselves and their children (Ceballo, 2004; Ochoa, 2000; Olmedo, 2003; Reese, Kroesen, & Gallimore, 2000).

Finding Strength

The new immigrant parents we interviewed found strength in overcoming these challenges. They actively sought to transform adversity and foster

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Table 5
Finding New Strengths: Major Themes and Repeated Ideas (*N* = 18)

Themes	Percentages
A. Empathizing with and respecting adolescent children	89
1. Receiving strength, encouragement, and support for children	
2. Admiring the adaptability, bravery, and maturity of their children	
3. Understanding their children's suffering and loss	
B. Seeking help and fostering support	67
1. Wanting psychological counseling and other medical care	
2. Attending programs at Latino community centers	
3. Wanting to be more involved with children's schools	
4. Working at building community	
C. Developing bicultural coping skills	61
1. Teaching children about their heritage	
2. Overcoming negative images of Hispanics and Latinos	
3. Learning American culture and values	
D. Increasing parental communication	44
1. Making time to talk with children	
2. Being more attentive to their children's needs	
3. Speaking openly and honestly	

Note: Percentages sum to more than 100, because some parents brought up more than one theme within this construct.

resilience in their children (Table 5). First, Latino immigrant parents directly expressed empathy with their children for the challenges they faced and showed tremendous respect for the capacity of their children to adapt. Second, they expressed a strong interest in learning about resources to help their children and, if these resources were not available, they worked to foster support for their children. Third, they worked with their children to develop bicultural coping skills. Finally, they sought to increase communication with their children and advised future immigrants to do the same.

Empathizing With and Respecting Adolescent Children

All of our informants empathized with the suffering and loss that their children had experienced during their family's transition to the United States. As a result, many parents had come to admire the resilience of their children. One mother's empathy and admiration exemplifies best what we heard from many:

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> I think that she is a girl that is adaptable, sensible, calm. . . . In her country, everything was different. She had her father. She had her nanny that loved her. She [the nanny] would have her favorite foods ready for her. She'd set out her clothes to wear each day. Thank God she has adapted to all this. . . . She has overcome, because she is a very special girl. . . . My gratitude for this child reaches to the sky. . . . This child is very, very good. She is exceptional.

Parents also identified their children as a source of strength and support. As a second mother discussed traveling in the trunk of a car to migrate to the United States, she stated,

> [My daughter] gave me strength during the trip. I would say to her, "Oh my god, daughter. We are at a point where we can still not go on. Why don't we go back? We are going to suffocate where they are going to put us." And she said, "No, Mami. Let's go," because she really wanted to come here. And she gave me strength. I said, "look at where they are going to put us, no let's not go on." And she said, "yes," and gave me strength to go on. That is how we made it.

Seeking Help and Fostering Supports

To help support their adolescent children's transition to life in the United States, many of the interviewed parents were engaged in supportive activities and programs offered through local Latino community centers and school groups. Despite its historical importance in the adaptation of many immigrants to the United States (Menjivar, 2003), the church was noticeably absent as a source of support for immigrant parents who participated in this study. In the new receiving community from which our respondents were recruited, local Catholic, Protestant, and evangelical churches provide financial support to Latino community centers rather than directly providing services.

One parent explained how she helped her son deal with the transition to school in the United States by finding him a tutor through a local Latino community center. After explaining how her daughter had gotten into a fight with a White American student who had been teasing her about her Latino heritage, another parent told how she was working with the school to find a school counselor for her daughter. As one mother explained, these services were very supportive:

> Of course, at first when she started going to school, she did not speak English, and neither did I. And we suffered a lot. I think it was what motivated me to go to look for [a Latino community center]. For me, the [Latino Community

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> Center] is like a second home. There are times when there are problems in my own house, like with health, like my husband's recent accident. And there are times that I feel more comfortable, more relaxed at the [Latino Community Center] than in my own home because I know I am going to arrive home to find stress—that sometimes there is not enough money, that there are problems, that I have a pain here, my husband, the appointments. I have three children who go to three different schools, and my life is very hard.

In addition, parents eagerly probed interviewers for information about additional resources in their communities available to help Latino immigrants. They expressed a desire for psychological counseling for themselves and their children. They expressed a desire for more involvement in children's schools. One parent even expressed an interest in building community through neighborhood work groups similar to those in her home country.

Developing Bicultural Coping Skills

Through these established community groups and on their own, parents worked to develop bicultural coping skills in their children (Delgado-Gaitan, 1993). For some parents, the development of bicultural coping skills began with recognition of the differences between the United States and their home countries. With this recognition came an understanding that migration involved an adaptation process. As two parents explained,

> [It is] a difficult adaptation for her during this adolescent time. What I tell her is . . . we have to try to adapt ourselves to what is happening and to try to give of ourselves to others, to give to those who are different from us so that we can be at peace. During this time, we can feel things. We can feel sad, lonely. But we must remember that we are going through an adaptation that is physical, spiritual, and emotional.
>
> She has to acculturate because of school and because of her friends. . . . Here she has to be mixed. [But], she has to preserve her identity. She is a Hispanic, and she has a rich culture.

Given that many of our parents were encountering ethnic diversity and racism for the first time, parents also focused on helping their children understand racial differences and cope with racism and discrimination. Parents reported talking with their children about how best to assert their rights when they felt discriminated against and how to interpret negative or stereotypical images about Latinos. They also sought to overcome negative stereotypes by helping their children to develop a positive image of themselves and their heritages. The following excerpt demonstrates this best:

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> [Our kids] hear really bad comments [about Mexicans]. So I started thinking, "What can I do so that my daughter grows to love her state, where she is from, her land.". . . . And so, I started telling her about my mom, that she was very nice. And I would start . . . cooking for them things so that they could start tasting, start enjoying [Mexican things]. . . . And I started bringing her typical dresses that I would get at the Mexican stores. . . . And that is how they started changing their minds. . . . Even now, sometimes her friends come to play over here, and she asks me to tell them what Mexico is like. . . . And I tell them, "We dance like this or like that over there." Or I will play Mexican music for them. . . . I tell them nice things. And now they have gotten it. They're Mexican.

In addition to speaking with their children directly about the acculturation process and about race and ethnicity, our informants also demonstrated bicultural coping skills by speaking with their children about how best to achieve academic and economic success in the United States. They emphasized educational attainment and encouraged their children to study. One mother reported advising her daughter as follows:

> And you're going to study and study and study. . . . You have to demand more so that they demand more of you. We have to take advantage of being in this country—in the United States. We have to go to high school. And probably we can even go to the university and beyond.

A second mother shared with us what she says to her sons:

> You will be more than him, if you put in a good effort. You will be more than he is. . . . If you study, if you put in a good effort, perhaps he will end up working for you. . . . That's why you should study. So that you don't go into construction like your Dad. So that you don't have to go and clean bathrooms or houses.

Increasing Parent–Child Communication

The fact that many parents reported talking with their children about the process of adaptation to the United States, race and discrimination, and pathways to economic success in the United States suggests that increased parent–child communication is a tool used by immigrant parents to help promote resiliency. When asked what type of advice one would give a parent who was moving to the United States from your home country, nearly half of our informants recommended improving parent–child communication. They recommended that new immigrant parents be attentive to their children's

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needs, make time to talk with their children, and speak openly and honestly about issues their children would face as adolescents and as immigrants in the United States. In the words of a Mexican mother,

> I would give the advice to speak openly about everything, about everything in terms of that possibility to be exposed to: that they are vulnerable to drugs, that they are vulnerable to temptations, that their sexuality starts to wake up. [I would advise new immigrant parents] that they have to teach [their children and] that they have to protect them.

Our interviews with Latino immigrant parents identified four strategies that immigrant parents use to empower themselves and their children—empathizing with and respecting adolescent children, seeking help and fostering social support for their children, developing bicultural coping skills in their children, and improving their communication with their children. Our findings add to the growing body of knowledge about how Latino immigrant parents help to support their children despite having limited socioeconomic resources and English-language skills (Ceballo, 2004; Ochoa, 2000; Olmedo, 2003; Reese et al., 2000). Parents clearly communicate the importance of education to their children and encourage them to do well, they convey a high degree of respect and trust in their teenage children, and they insulate their children against negative U.S. social stereotypes of Latino immigrants by providing them with more positive cultural images.

Discussion

In this qualitative analysis, we examined the process of becoming an American parent. The process began with the decision to migrate, a decision that most immigrant parents characterized as a parenting decision. The process continued as parents began to adjust their parenting practices in response to their new environment. We documented Latino parents' interpretations of the challenges of parenting in the United States and their resourcefulness in finding new strategies to foster positive outcomes in their children. Our findings have important implications for future research, for practitioners working with Latino immigrant families, and for policy makers designing programs for Latino immigrant families.

Implications for Theory

Based on our research, we have proposed a model of becoming an American parent that identifies salient risk and protective factors discussed

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by immigrant parents (Figure 1). Our model validates the theoretical framework provided by Garcia Coll et al.'s (1996) integrative model of development in minority children and expands her notion of adaptive culture to include adaptive parenting strategies. The parents in our study provided us with a rich glimpse of the interplay between societal, parental, and child factors that contribute to the resiliency and developmental competencies of their children.

The model makes three important contributions to the literature on immigrant families. First, it contributes to the understanding of risk and protective factors during adolescence by describing the role that migration and acculturation play in shaping parenting by Latino immigrants. We observe that both risk and resilience are shaped by the unique cultural and contextual experiences of Latino immigrants. This research supports the hypotheses that "resources and adversities that are involved in the process of resilience are embedded in social contexts" and "in order to understand risk and protective factors the ecological and cultural context in which individuals reside must be understood" (Arrington & Wilson, 2000, p. 226). For the Latino immigrant parents that spoke with us, key aspects of the social context included changes in social position, especially the loss of family–peer networks, and reductions in their class status; and economic and social segregation experienced at school, work, or in the broader community.

Second, our model expands our understanding of acculturation and acculturative stress among Latino immigrant parents. We have deconstructed the acculturation process with respect to parenting in the United States and provided more detailed information on sources of acculturative stress for Latino parents with adolescent children. Acculturative stress resulted from the grief associated with sacrifice and loss, the challenge of navigating new social contexts, the frustration and humiliation experienced as parents and their children confronted racism, and the generalized and specific fears associated with learning to live in a new environment.

Finally, our model makes a contribution to understanding the process through which immigrants with children adapt their parenting strategies to promote the health and well-being of their sons and daughters. Undertaken as a parenting decision, migration exposes immigrant families to new or different risks than they experienced in their home countries but also creates the opportunity for new rewards. Changes in social position lead to encounters with economic and social segregation and exposure to new social contexts that both promote and inhibit their children's development. In response, parents and children develop positive coping strategies that promote their success in the United States. The process is not static but ongoing. As parents

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continue to monitor the success of their children, they develop new strategies and may even choose to migrate within the United States or return home in an effort to ensure the well-being of their children.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Our analysis also provides insight into how policy and practice might better promote resiliency through the development of culturally and contextually informed programs. Most ethnicity-based research on parenting and child development treats ethnicity as a static variable that defines a particular cultural group. Our research suggests that practitioners and policy makers should identify first-generation immigrants as a culturally distinct group and should re-examine common assumptions about Latino families. First, immigrant parents do understand what their children are going through. They empathize with them, respect them, and admire them. Second, Latino immigrant parents actively seek support for themselves and their children. They are not disinterested or passive parents. When support services are available and accessible, they will use them. Third, Latino immigrant parents want personal space for themselves and their children. Although Latino immigrants may have a strong family orientation, shared living arrangements may be more a reflection of economic necessity rather than *familismo*. Fourth, parents face real challenges in attaining the resources needed to support the development and well-being of their children. Any interventions with lower income Latino immigrant families must address the resource constraints faced by parents.

As practitioners, researchers, and policy makers aim to design, evaluate, and improve parenting programs and other interventions in the Latino community, they must continue to unmask the cultural differences that are associated with countries of origin, immigrant generation, socioeconomic status, and area of residence in the United States. By moving away from a stereotypic approach to culture and toward a dynamic approach, service providers and policy makers will be better able to design culturally responsive programs that promote resiliency (Harwood et al., 2002).

Based on this analysis, we recommend that practitioners capitalize on the natural resiliency of Latino immigrant parents by supporting them in their efforts to improve parent–child communication, develop bicultural coping skills in themselves and their children, and identify community-based resources for immigrant families. Schools of social work, public health, and psychology programs can also assist in this effort by developing cultural competency curricula that include information about common migration and acculturation experiences in immigrant families. Finally, policy makers can support the acculturation of new immigrant parents and their children by

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fostering the development of resources for immigrant parents in their communities. The development of such resources may be particularly important in new immigrant–receiving communities such as North Carolina.

Limitations

As a qualitative analysis, this study faces three primary limitations. First, it is inherently based on a small population. The strength of this study lies in its focus on an understudied population—first-generation Latino immigrant parents and a nontraditional receiving community. Most of what we know to date regarding parenting in Latino families comes from studies of second-generation or third-generation parents living in traditional receiving communities. Second, it does not rely on measuring risk factors or identifying parenting practices with standardized and potentially ethnocentric instruments. The strength of qualitative analysis lies in its capacity to uncover common threads in the subjective experiences of informants and develop culturally relevant and contextualized interpretations of events. Third, this study is inherently exploratory. By developing a model of risk and resiliency that is grounded in an understanding of migration and acculturation experiences, we make a significant contribution to the literature. Although our findings provide a more integrated view of parenting in the context of immigration to the United States, each theme identified merits additional exploration and development in future research. Moreover, to confirm the theoretical framework, future research must replicate our results. In addition, research must be undertaken in immigrant communities of different ethnocultural origins. The dynamics of risk and resiliency may be similar within all immigrant communities, but it may also differ based on the ecological niches occupied by different ethnic groups. Future research on parenting, risk, and resilience must do more to incorporate culture and diversity.

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