"I Put a Mask on" The Human Side of Deportation Effects on Latino Youth

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Abstract

Recent research on immigration has looked at forced deportation issues and specifically on the mental health issues of immigrant parents separated from their children rather than from the child's experience. Hispanic adolescents residing in the United States who live with the fear of being separated from their parents either through forced parental deportation or as a result of being detained themselves may face serious health and mental health problems during the crucial developmental stage of adolescence and pre-adolescence. This study looks at twenty children ages 11-18 (males and females). Qualitative methods were used including focus groups and individual in-depth interviews to examine issues among youth who were at risk of being deported and/or whose parents had been deported or were at risk of deportation. Evidence from the study demonstrated that the youth have complex understandings of the stress of living in undocumented families that can be categorized in individual, social, and structural levels.

Keywords: Immigration, Deportation, Latinos, Adolescence

Introduction

Worldwide population changes during the past century, reflected through migrations of populations from rural to urban areas and from one country to another, have led to an increased need to better understand their migratory experiences and the health and mental health of these populations (Demeny & McNicoll, 2003).

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This is especially critical in the United States, where over 40 million immigrants reside (Motel & Patten, 2013). As with national trends, the state of Michigan saw increased growth in immigration, in particular with Latino[6] populations (Sanders et al., 2013). In addition, political and economic debates continue to aggravate social tensions within the United States, at times risking the lives of targeted immigrant populations.

As fear of immigration trends rise, government immigration enforcement intensifies. Most notably for the Latino population in the United States has been the target of increased immigration raids lead by Immigration Customs and Enforcement (ICE), a branch of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Scholars have noted that these increased raids involve human rights violations (Bustamante, 2011; Sanders, et al., 2013). Immigration raids devastate communities and destabilize already vulnerable populations (Brabeck, 2010; Crouse, 2008).

Notably, the separation and disruption to Latino families during the migration process (both voluntary migration to the United States, and forced migration *out* of the United States) has received scant attention. Most research to date focuses on the mental health issues of immigrant parents separated from their children rather than from the child's experience (Aroian, Norris, González de Chávez Fernández, & García Averasturi, 2008; Bohr & Tse, 2009; Miranda, Siddique, Der-Martirosian, & Belin, 2005). Less research has paid attention to the health and mental health issues for children who face being separated from their parents (Kupersmidt & Martin, 1997). Latino children who live with the fear of being separated from their parents either through forced deportation or as a result of being detained may face serious mental health problems.

There are many reasons children become separated from their parents during the migration process. The "push and pull" dynamics of economic necessity, for example, has long been suggested to effect families and communities in their decisions to separate (Lee, 1966), where the "push" factors are usually forces that encourage migration away from the home countries (economic uncertainty, violence, political persecution) and the "pull" factors attract migrants to the new country. Parents at times must leave their families in their home countries in order to meet pecuniary needs for themselves and their families.

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[6] We use the term Latino were applicable throughout in order to honor our research community, who refer to themselves as Latinos rather than Hispanics.

For others, children are expected to go abroad and work in order to secure remittances for the family back home. In addition, scholars argue that macro and micro structures of labor migration impact when, where, and how individuals make migration decisions (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006).

A phenomena that has received less attention in the work of family separation of migrants is that of the detention and deportation of parents resulting in separation from their children (Brabeck, 2010). This issue of forced separation between family members has gained importance especially among Latino families in the United States, for several reasons. First, the population of Latinos continues to rise; according to the U.S. Census between 2000 and 2010 the Hispanic population accounted for a substantial portion of the total US population growth (Humes, 2011). The rising numbers of Hispanic families in the U.S. highlights the urgency of addressing forced separation. Five million children have at least one undocumented parent (Capps, 2007); these families remain at risk for developmental delays, emotional trauma and other health issues (Capps, 2007; Ortega et al., 2009). Secondly, Latino families are known for their interdependence with other family members (strong extended families) and also adhere to highly patriarchal cultural values (Galanti, 2003). The disruption of family structures by forced separation throw women and children into new and especially vulnerable positions. Thirdly, recent anti-immigration legislation and raids create potential hostile social environments for children living in fear that their parents or themselves may face detention or deportation. As the Latino population continues to grow in size, the health and mental health of this group persists as a vital area for concern.

We present findings of a community-based participatory research study aimed at acquiring an in-depth understanding of the types of stressors undocumented Latino children and US citizen children of undocumented Latino parents experience as a result of their immigrant status and ongoing deportation risk, including their actual deportation experiences. Specifically, in this study we examined how the children understand and conceptualize their experiences under the constant threat of deportation. We also examine how these strategies may serve to buffer health and mental health problems they may experience.

Methods

In partnership with the Washtenaw Interfaith Coalition for Immigrant Rights (WICIR), a grass-root advocacy organization for undocumented immigrants in Southeast Michigan (Sanders et al., 2013), we jointly recruited 20 children ages 11-18 years for this study. Three focus groups and five one-on-one in-depth interviews examined issues of health and mental health strategies among children who were at risk of being deported and/or whose parents were at risk of deportation or when at least one parent had been deported.

Prior to the study, and in response to the highly vulnerable and invisible nature of working with these children, researchers met with families at a community event organized by WICIR to present the study and answer questions. Parents were given a chance to ask questions, discuss possible scenarios, and answer questions about risk and trauma. Recruitment began after permission from the families was given and IRB approval was obtained from their corresponding Universities including a Certificate of Confidentiality from the National Institutes of Health. Recruitment of children for focus groups and individual interviews was ongoing and conducted over a 12-month period in 2011-2012. Focus groups were held in a local health clinic and a church common area. Although one critique of focus groups is that they are inadequate for controversial topics, focus groups can "provide safety in numbers for people in vulnerable situations" (Patton, 2002, p. 388). Still, in response to five children who did not want to meet in a group setting, individual one-on-one interviews were conducted with these youth in a safe location (their homes, usually, or the community center). These five youth were all recent immigrants, and spoke little English. Some expressed concern that they did not want to share their experiences in a group, while a few were concerned about their ability to communicate (these interviews were conducted in the preferred language of the interviewee). All interviews were de-identified and recorded electronically. Once finished, the interviews and focus groups were uploaded on a secure server at one of the universities, and transcribed. Transcripts were then uploaded into maxQDA and analyzed.

Data were analyzed for patterns and reoccurring themes (Patton, 2002; Bryman, 2006). Using principles for community based participatory research (Healy, 2001; Lather, 1986), the research team composed of university researchers and WICIR members read all of the transcripts and then met to discuss the initial coding and coding verification practice. Codes were discussed and a code-book developed. The code-book was then re-checked by all members of the research team for accuracy. Subsequently, research staff applied the codes to the data, and from these codes and memo writing, larger themes and categories emerged. For the purposes of this paper, we focus on issues related to immigration and integration theories and how the youth responded with their lived experiences.

The first focus group was conducted in the basement of a health center with all female adolescents ranging in age 11 to 17. The health center addresses the health of young people ages 12-21 by offering education, health care, and support for adolescents. The basement of the health center was a multipurpose room that various community groups used. Groups working with various health advocacy issues such as teen pregnancy, immunizations, and the like also use this space. However, this night the focus group was the only activity going on. This location was chosen because the adolescents knew the health center from prior youth groups. No one could enter the room without the whole group knowing. At first, these girls reservedly responded to questions. They giggled, hung their heads low, and diverted their gaze. However, once a few of the older girls started to speak the focus group progressed more smoothly. All had experienced a family member being deported, and they all agreed that they lived in a community where at any moment a loved one could be taken away by the authorities.

The second and third focus groups took place in a local church, though in two different rooms. The church was chosen for its location (centrality to the neighborhood where many of the families lived) and also the inherent safe space that the parents felt in dropping their children off at a church, rather than an unfamiliar space. The rooms were different, one was a small room for pre-school activities and the second room was a larger meeting area for church activities. In the smaller room we held a focus group with three young boys ages 11, 13, and 17. The vast differences in the ages reflected differences in the breadth of responses as can be expected from such a wide age gap (to be discussed in the results section).

However, all youth in this focus group also experienced deportation in their families, and all were very vocal about their experiences. The third focus group was a mixed group of two boys and a girl. Although we were worried about gender dynamics and perhaps silencing of voices in this group, it turned out that all attendees spoke eloquently and at length about their impressions and experiences. The age group for this last session was 14, 15, and 16. This perhaps accounts for the lack of awkwardness during the interviews.

Results

A total of 20 youth participated in the study ages 11-18 (mean age = 14.8; sdev=1.9) and consisted of 12 females and 8 males, 12 of which were undocumented. Three themes emerged for how youth understood the meanings and experiences of the threat of parental deportation in three overall mechanisms that include a social, structural and individual component: (1) Social: Understanding Deportation in a Context of Pervasive Social Discrimination and Prejudice, (2) Structural: Distrust of Normative Social Safety Structures, and (3) Individual: Internalized Cognitive Dualism. As a side note, the names we use on some of the quotes are not the youth real names.

Social: understanding deportation: contexts of personal and of social inequities. This theme reflected youths' perceptions of their social realities. One group of codes that helped define this issue included: experiences of discrimination, managing immigrant status, resigning envy, and isolation. Codes in this theme reflected societal effect. Youth were particularly articulate about how they understood societal influences on their lives and the lives of their families. This follows complex definitions of discrimination that scholars identify as unfair treatment via structural and interpersonal pathways (Nancy Krieger, 1999).

The deportation of a parent leaves indelible marks of fear, confusion, and frustration. The following quote from a young girl illustrates this point:

My dad was deported a year ago on Dec. 13. …after school I was talking to my friends when I got a phone call. My mom called saying "your dad's in jail immigration got him." And I just started crying.

I told her when? And she's like during lunch time and it was an hour away from where we were She was telling me to call the lawyer to get her to help him ….and I did but they [the law office] told me that she [the lawyer] went on vacation. And there was nothing they could do until she came back [which would be] "probably next year."

I: Oh, because it was December…..

It was horrible. I went to my mom and told her, we should try and find someone else and we did. So we found someone else but with [my dad's] case it was too …hard ….All we could do was wait…two weeks later ….they already deported him. I was working with my mom when I got the phone call. [My dad said] "There's nothing you should do anymore you should just stop…" And that's when my mom like said "I think it is time to leave [to return to Mexico]." That shocked me because she wanted me and my brother to leave too ….she wanted to leave couldn't handle it anymore and I didn't want to but then oh my God I don't want to be away from my parents I don't want them to be separated so I told her that it's alright I don't mind changing schools or anything but I'm more scared about my brother who has problems and I told them she should think about it more, talk to my dad about it and all. And she did she realized that I need to finish high school. She said that she'll wait until high school till I graduate and then she'll leave. And my dad doesn't want to come back up. He doesn't want to come back at all because he'll be scared all he would do was be in fear of everything. I want him to come back cuz we all miss him. I miss him. I go visit him but it's still not the same. Thinking that he's far away from my mom. We don't have as much help like around the house or like at work like paying bills and all that since he used to be making more money than my mom.

The quote above is an example of the frustration, sadness, and longing that children experience based on a parent being deported. These youth must deal with these oppressive uncertainties: not knowing if when you go to school your parents will still be there when you get back; possibly being uprooted and moving to Mexico; longing for your family to be reunited; and the uncertainty of covering expenses and bills when the major breadwinner is gone. In a sense, this participant lives with a multitude of uncertainty, and within the space of an unintentional broken home.

In particular, her speech shows exasperation when she lets out "oh my God" in response to the thought that she herself might be forced to decide whether she would live without her parents. This quote thus shows that youth experience a multitude of uncertainties stemming from living in a mixed status home.

In addition to the personal context deportation, some youth adeptly noted their understanding of social discrimination based on race. The following youth discusses an incident when ICE conducted a raid on her house, searching for her father.

I mean I was 10 and there's a gun being pointed at me. I want to see a white kid being pointed a gun. He's screaming, he's yelling for his mama, and they come and they do something. But me because I'm Mexican they didn't do anything. Because I'm illegal because they knew that the family they were dealing with that day wasn't going to be able to do anything against them. So that's why they were so secure in what they were doing cuz I know if I would have been a kid with blonde hair…they probably wouldn't even have done it in the first place, you know. (Carla, age 17)

Carla's description of the raid on her home begins with a racial comparison to highlight her understanding of her own position as a Mexican youth, and the contrast to holding dominant social physiology, ie a white kid with blonde hair. She senses that if she were white "they" (her allusion to dominant protective police) would act as agents of care, "they come and they do something." But in her case, those caretakers violated her world. Scholars have grappled with how youth become aware of racial and ethnic differences as they develop (Quintana, 1999), however in this case Carla not only is aware of her difference, but her realization carries alarmingly painful violent imagery that she links with social hatred of her Mexican racial identity. This quote showed that Carla is acutely aware of society's racialized preferences. What is most interesting is the use of racialized language to interpret her feelings of oppression and fear. In this way, Carla's lived reality reflects a social oppositionality, she views race (rather than documented status) as the defining factor of privilege and oppression.

Youth also understood that their ethnic identity drew discriminatory practices from not just dominant social members, but also from other underrepresented groups.

I lived in Detroit for a couple years, ….when you go to the to the part of Detroit where it's like mostly Arabics… if you walk in and you look like completely Mexican they might follow you around or like keep an eye on you, uh, make sure you don't take anything. And they wouldn't do that if a white person came into their stores. They wouldn't keep an eye on them because it's a white person, you know, …yeah we definitely deal with some stuff that most kids don't. And that does put like some stress on people. (Isabel, age 14).

Researchers struggle with understanding the complexities of what Isabel articulates in this passage. In particular, limited studies examine the difficulties of how minority groups interact with each other and within the context of hegemonic forces. To the extent this phenomena has been studied, scholars use the term "intergroup relations" to aid in the understanding and study of exactly what Isabel notes above (Taylor & Moghaddam, 1994). In answering a question about what experiences she has that other kids her age do not have, Isabel immediately claims that she must deal with racial discriminatory practices from other minorities. What she does not say is that unfair immigration policies target her and her family's well-being. Rather she, like Carola, couch their reality in pure racialized terms. Isabel believes that if she were white she would not have to deal with racial profiling. But even more interesting is that Isabel clearly notes that whites do not have to experience this profiling, and as such they have qualitatively different adolescent developmental experiences. The youth understand that their realities exist as layers of multiple marginalizations both by dominant white groups as in the case with Carla, and within minority groups as with Isabel. These distinctions challenge traditional immigration theories that privilege a binary model (those here with and those without documentation). Current theories do not capture the complexity of integration processes as experienced by adolescent youth of mixed documentation status and thus leave wide swaths of experiential territory unexplained.

Structural: The theme of structural issues relates to the distrust of normative social safety nets. These codes included moments when the youth felt wronged by their country, by current power forces and by negative employment perceptions.

One of the youths noted the structural difficulties of trying to get social services for her family, with her youngest brother being the only U.S. citizen in their household.

And for an example, in my house there is a citizen, you know, there is someone that needs his [country's support] you know what I'm saying and because of us, he's not getting what he wants when he should be receiving the help he needs, the food he needs, you know. I mean anyways in the DHS [Department of Human Services] they weren't giving me food, you know, I'm illegal. They were giving my brother and they took it away. (Isabel, age 14)

This quote, which brings together issues of citizenship, class, and welfare, defines Isabel's frustration with how her status and the status of her parents negatively impact her younger brother's opportunity to receive entitlements. What is noteworthy is that Isabel articulates a type of associative guilt that family members experience when living in a mixed home. She understands this issue as one of injustice, her brother as a U.S. citizen, and to her understanding can expect the support services of DHS. Her brother "should be receiving the help he needs", according to Isabel, and because he is not, this proves to her that structural systems fail her family.

Another youth addressed the topic of how the perception that Mexicans take jobs away from deserving citizens.

No we didn't take those jobs…Like if a Latino wanted to he could take a doctor's job or a nurse's job. Latinos have as much capacity as any others, you know, even just because we come from a country that doesn't have the same education level as other countries- it doesn't mean that we don't have the same capacity, you know, a Latino can do any job an Asian can or an African-American…We just take those jobs because they're the easiest jobs for us coming from our background, they're the easiest jobs…we came here for [the] American Dream….Um, we're not *taking* those jobs, um, like why would you, being an American citizen a Caucasian male, being born here why would you want to be stuck like washing dishes or scrubbing floors…you should want something better for yourself. You have the resources, you have a social security number- why not go for better? (José Luis, 16)

José Luis passionately initiates this discussion. He questions the validity of the structural perception of "taking jobs away" and though he also includes racialized language, he points out that a nuanced interpretation of the employment debate. José Luis cannot understand why individuals would argue about what he views as menial service jobs ("the easiest jobs"), when what he sees is their inabilities to advance their own work lives.

His disdain for this discussion and its progenitors is summed by his quote "why not go for better?" In this way, he turns the debate around on those who argue against immigration and calls into question their own lack of motivation to improve their lives. This radical move points the finger back at critics of immigration and uses American boot-strap language to deconstruct the job debate. Though José Luis's frustration stems from his belief that he is structurally bound to not be able to go for better, and his own opportunities limit his potential, he adroitly points out the major flaws and ironies in this debate.

Individual: internalized cognitive dualism. This theme was drawn from codes that demonstrated at an individualistic level a dualized cognition. We coin the term "dualized cognition" to show two distinct operations occurring. First, duality implies a bifurcated reality, not an integrated whole but rather a palpable schism. Secondly, we use "cognition" to illustrate the mental internalizations of the youth's immigrant experiences. Thus, a dualized cognition shows how this bifurcated internalized mental functioning works within the individual. Codes included: Wanting normalcy, carrying wounds, "wearing a mask", and managing parental deportation. This theme differs from the social and structural themes above in that it demonstrates how the youth's internal divisions affect their cognitive processes.

In the quote below, one youth reveals how she deals with the dilemma of hiding the undocumented status of her parents.

I don't think I really had a childhood to …live because my parents were working like day shifts and night shifts and I would barely see them so the stress level would be [high] like…what if they find out that my sister and I are home alone with like no guardian like what would happen to them? Or like would they get deported, would we get like taken away? What's going to happen? …we couldn't tell anyone that we were left home alone or what our life was like at home. Like we would just have this like this mask on (emphasis by authors) like put on … we went to school and [had to] pretend everything was fine and then we would come home and have to face the subject of financial issues and deportations …the risk in everything we do. …we have to be careful in this you know and if we get pulled over what's going to happen? …you have to be limited on what you say …anything you say could get you in trouble. (Rosa , age 17)

Rosa's fractured life of living one reality at school pretending "everything was fine" and a second reality of home as "the risk in everything we do" created in her the need to describe her life as living with "a mask on." She does this in order to fit in and normalize her life; she works to pretend that "all is fine" because she recognizes that a normative existence must devoid itself of her home reality. This concept recollects early racial theoretical constructs of double consciousness (Du Bois, 1903) and the notion of interpreting one's lived experience through an "other," an often hostile and unforgiving society. Rosa understands that her cognitive reality must be the maintenance of a fractured identity. Her second life, at home, is filled with terror, fear, and uncertainty and colors the veneer of her persona at school. As a result, Rosa claims that she could never truly have a childhood, and that she must censor her expressions at all times. Her life must be in some ways a living negotiation of control and repression.

For other youth, the desire for normalcy, what they define as a normal adolescence, permeates their lives as seen in the following:

I just want to be like other teenagers, you know, doing dumb stuff …. laughing about it. But you're really restricted because you could get in trouble and then the police might come and call your parents and you know then my parents would be involved and that's a danger for them cuz they're undocumented so I can't really do much of that…I always have this thing on the back of my mind…I have all these scenarios going on in my mind like …what are the possibilities if I do this, what are the possibilities if I do this or that? Will I get my family in trouble? It's just a constant thing going on in my mind. So like I try to restrict myself a little or like you know limit myself in many activities that I do with my friends. (Ximena, age 17)

Ximena self-restricts her behavior because as she states that she has "this thing on the back of my mind" and that her constant energy to manage her behavior prevents a normal adolescence of carefreeness. Ximena demonstrates with this quote that she scrutinizes her activities and like Rosa (indeed all the youths in this study), she is not free to enjoy her adolescence in traditional developmental ways; the youth live in a constant internalized negotiation of monitoring and restriction. This internal cognitive dualism offers the youth a tool to negotiate their complex lived realities, and the long-term effects of managing disparate and opposing internalized frameworks point to a bleak societal outlook.

Conclusion

Youth experience their immigration statuses and those of their parents and families as a complex web of frustration and isolation, but also resiliency. The structural, familial/social, and internal processes exacerbate the youth's health and mental health status so that they speak about immigration enforcement effects as *linked to* hegemonic functioning. That is, the social structure they live in *actively* rejects either their life or a significant part of their life (i.e. their parents). Both undocumented and documented youth living with parents who are undocumented face multiple marginalizing social structures that manifest in unique stress and unhealthy traumatic experiences. As the number of Latinos continues to rise in the United States, our treatment of this community and their youth shapes the future health of communities.

Children live in high-stress environments, living in post-traumatic stress like conditions. Although we chose not to focus on age or gender differences for this study, it should be noted that age and gender variations were noted and were found to be slightly variegated across age groups. Younger children employed simplistic and altruistic definitions of their experiences, while older children (especially eldest children) demonstrated complex strategies for dealing with the threat of family deportation. However, all children were highly affected and demonstrated nuanced and highly complex narratives for understanding their lived experiences that extend beyond passive acceptance. These strategies included negotiating social, structural, and individualized processes as argued above.

These youth in fact use dominant United States social milieu to interpret and understand their experiences. For example, by couching their experiences in highly racialized language this reflects the U.S.'s often contentious racial make-up. In addition, in speaking about the issues of those of social injustice, or harkening to dominant memes such as that of rugged individualism. These youth are living on the margins of society, however they understand in very mature and complex ways the construction of their social reality, and they are both in the US cultural framework as evidenced by their use of social values in their quotes and at the same time on the margins of it as illustrated of their experiences of stress and vulnerability.

In addition, since these data have been gathered the climate of immigration has increasingly become more vocally hostile towards Latin American youth coming to the United States. Deportations and raids continue to rise, suggesting that the youth in this study may have experience even higher rates of stress. How they will cope or engage those challenges has yet to fully be seen.

As young Latinos are poised to become the nation's largest group of minorities in the coming decades, the current treatment of young Latinos is alarming. The distrust of law enforcement and disenfranchisement from educational and employment opportunities needs to be further explored and new policies on immigration need to be enacted. If these youth continue to consider their lives bifurcated and their families targeted, yet at the same time feel appreciation and longing to stay, then what will the future effects be? As Du Bois (1903) argues, there is a yearning for the reconciliation of the double consciousness, and desire for the fractured to be whole. This young generation experience isolation, exclusion, and conflicted realities that further distance their healthy and full incorporation. We argue that rather than continue along this path, the strengths, intelligence, and resiliency of the young needs further social, political, and economic support. Policies are needed that improve educational opportunities, social supports, and family reunification. Without a drastic shift in current immigration policies, generations of Hispanic youth cannot hope to escape the detrimental developmental effects of living with the threat of forced separation without more humane immigration policies.

Acknowledgements

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