

Mothering Through Acculturation *Reflections of Salvadorian Mothers in Canada*

This paper presents findings from a qualitative study with Salvadorian mothers in Southwestern Ontario. A total of 16 mothers were interviewed. Though the paper describes their struggles in negotiating the settlement process it also highlights their resiliency, which enabled them to be emotionally available for their daughters. Immigration invariably challenged each mother's understanding of mothering, drawing her into a reassessment of what she needed to do in order to support her daughter's cultural transition into Canadian society.

Introduction

The subject of how Salvadorian women negotiated their roles as mothers after forced migration and during settlement in Canada is close to my heart since I am an immigrant who mothered two young children while navigating the challenges of acculturation. Like many of the women in this study, underemployment, language barriers, prejudice, and discrimination influenced both my acculturation process and my mothering experience in Canadian society. And yet, exploring the mothering experiences of Salvadorian women was not in my mind as I began this study. My original intent was to examine the values that women perceived to be important to either maintain or transform while acculturating. As the study progressed, however, it became evident that the women's mothering experiences were integral to their acculturation. These experiences as mothers were, however, almost invisible because they were embedded in the women's multiple everyday tasks. The research findings presented here enhance our understanding of how the settlement experiences of immigrant women are closely tied to their active involvement in raising their children in a context foreign to their own. Additionally, they bring forth the invisibility and the hardships of mothering in a different context; the women's agency in

the re-positioning of themselves in order to support the social incorporation of their children in their new country, while they themselves are negotiating their own cultural transition.

Background: Salvadorian migration to Canada

During the civil war (1980–1992), millions of Salvadorians fled to North America in search of a safe haven (Kusnir, 2005). Between 1982 and 1983, approximately 3,000 refugee-seekers came to Canada directly from El Salvador. A second wave, of approximately 7,000 people, arrived during the mid-1980s and included people who had first illegally settled in the United States. Subsequent Salvadorian immigrants have arrived more gradually through Canada's family re-unification program (Da, 2002). A total of 33,860 El Salvadorian people came to Canada between 1974 and 2001, making them a relatively small group compared with other immigrant groups to Canada (Garcia, 2006).

The Salvadorians are distinctive from other immigrant groups to Canada. They have come to Canada from various regions of their home country. Most are from low socio-economic classes, but they have very different political commitments; some supported the military, others were revolutionaries. Many lived for some time in a transitional country such as the U.S., Mexico, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, or Cuba (Carranza, 2007a) before coming to Canada.

The specific social-geographical context of this paper is Kitchener-Waterloo, a medium-sized city in Southwestern Ontario. This is one of the fastest growing communities in Ontario, with a population of approximately 500,000, of which approximately 92,775 individuals are foreign-born (Region of Waterloo, 2004). Kitchener-Waterloo boasts Canada's fifth largest per capita immigrant population. Historically, immigrants came here from the United Kingdom, Portugal, Germany, and Poland. Indicative of more recent immigration trends, newer arrivals are from Yugoslavia, China, Bosnia and Herzegovina, India, Romania, and South and Central America. Refugees comprise 18.3 percent of the city's population, almost seven percent higher than the national average (Region of Waterloo, 2004).

There are approximately 7,000 people of Latin American origin in the region. The largest groups are from Mexico, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and Honduras. Others are from Chile, Peru, Colombia, Argentina, and Cuba (Region of Waterloo, 2004).

For the most part, Salvadorians arriving in this region have had the support of church congregations including Lutheran, Mennonite, United Church, and Jehovah's Witness. Like all immigrants, they are entitled to government social assistance, English classes, and employment and settlement counseling. While the overall context of reception has been supportive, the initial refugees arrived during a time of economic recession when jobs were scarce (Carranza, 2007a).

Although multi-ethnic, the city where this research was conducted lacks

the diversity of larger urban centres. The Spanish-speaking community is relatively small compared with such metropolitan areas as Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver where the majority of immigrants and refugees from Latin America have settled. In a small city, there may be less acceptance of racial/ethnic diversity and less understanding of refugee experiences. The majority of city residents are of white European background; their families entered Canada several generations ago. Their very different migration experiences may mean that Salvadorians in this region, in addition to being relatively isolated, find little external support, let alone an understanding of their trauma and losses (Carranza, 2007b).

In short, there was no established Salvadorian community to welcome and support the initial refugees. They had to face the challenge of living with another language, another culture, and another climate without the help of a community of co-ethnics. While they quickly joined the work force, they often worked for low wages. Many faced a sharp downward mobility, as their Salvadorian credentials and experience were not valued in the Canadian context (Carranza, 2007a, 2007b).

Mothering across borders

Regardless of race and ethnicity, mothering is a challenging task across the globe, made more difficult for women who lack a supportive community and/or extended family. Women's mothering is profoundly important to family structure (Chodorow, 1978: 3). Women place more emphasis on relationships, especially when it comes to their moral decisions, than do men (Gilligan, 1982). Mothers teach their children what they think is important for their survival and well-being in their own specific context.

Patrice DiQuinzio (1999) argues that mothering is influenced by social, cultural, political, economic, psychological and personal experiences. For example, Latina mothers' perceptions about mothering, including what it means to be a "good" or "bad" mother, have been shaped significantly by their history of colonization and oppression based on class, race, ethnicity and religion (Carranza, 2007a). Falicov (1998) goes so far as to argue that Latina mothers have been socialized to emulate the Virgin Mary with regards to self-abnegation and the sacrifices they make for their children.

Migration across borders challenges mothers to go beyond their expected mothering roles (Rosental and Roer-Strier, 2001; Wang and Phinney, 1998). For example, immigrant mothers of Latin American heritage living in North America perceive their role as nurturers to be acutely heightened after migration. After migration, mothers became the gatekeepers of their country-of-origin's key values (e.g. virginity, respect, obedience and familism, and strong family ties and loyalty between family members) (Baron, 2000; Flores and Carey, 2000; Gonzales-Castro, Boyer, and Balcazar, 2000; Partida, 1996). Hence, mothering in a country different than one's own entails a "transnational crossing connected to their memory and identity" (Reyes, 2002: 142).

Another recent study that I conducted with immigrant Salvadorian mothers and their adolescent daughters suggests that mothers use their transnational web of relationships with family members to nourish and maintain cultural values. Through story telling, mothers teach their daughters about *La vida Salvadoreña* (Salvadorian life), including their history of colonization, as well as the oppression of the indigenous people and their resistance to oppression. I found that such story-telling buffers negative effects of prejudice and discrimination. The daughters teach the same stories to their children. Together, they are defining the new generation of Salvadorians in their new country according to their race and ethnicity (Carranza, 2007a). Thus, in this instance and elsewhere, the cultural background of the mother shapes the motherhood experience (Richardson, 1993).

Methodology

In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with Salvadorian-born mothers living in a mid-sized Ontario city. All participants fled the civil war in El Salvador. Eight held university degrees or college diplomas. Eight had attended elementary school only. Out of the 16 mothers, eleven were married, three were separated or divorced, and two were widows.

Interviews were conducted in Spanish and in the women's homes. They lasted between 90 minutes and two hours and were audio-taped with the consent of the participants. A modified grounded theory approach was used to conduct the analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). I wrote up "research memos" after each interview. I was as accurate as possible in my observations of the interview process, recording the dynamics between the interviewee and myself and making notes about what was said and not said. I engaged in the interview process with all my senses, listening with intentionality and asking questions from a stance of curiosity about the "you knows" used by the participants (Ely, 1991). I was careful to probe their assumption that as a Salvadorian mother I would know some of their struggles.

A critical stance was maintained throughout the project (Reason, 1994). This entailed having awareness about the politics of difference and knowledge production (Freire, 2004) and working closely with three Salvadorian consultants throughout the research (two mothers and an adult daughter). Both mothers worked within the Salvadorian community, one as a health promotion officer, the other as a community development worker. Their involvement was critical in the development of interview questions, recruitment, and data analysis, especially regarding emergent themes and the overall process of knowledge production.

Findings

The following section presents some of the struggles that the mothers in this study experienced in their cultural transition into Canadian society. Their resilience and ability to bounce back in spite of their losses is noted as well.

Pseudonyms and some non-identifying biographical information are added to contextualize selected quotations.

**“Obligaciones de madre: Sufrimiento y sacrificios por los hijos”
[Mothers’ duties: Suffering and sacrifices for the children].**

Maternal sacrifice is a common value among Latin American women (Falicov, 1998). In this study, all 16 mothers talked about the changes they had made after migration to support their acculturation into Canadian society. The majority talked about having to endure significant sacrifices beyond what they would have experienced if they had stayed in El Salvador in order for their daughters to “get ahead.”

Julia, a stay-at-home mother and divorcee, says: “I sacrificed myself for my children. They have nothing to be ashamed of . . . I have not had another man since I separated from their father.” Julia’s choice to stay home to watch over her four children came from her desire to keep an eye on them, hoping to ensure their success at school. Her remark also highlights her pride about choosing to remain single, not even dating after her divorce; her “decency” was more valuable to her than her desire to explore new relationships. According to Julia, her impeccable conduct after the divorce brought them (her and her children) high esteem within their extended family, as well as within the local Latino community.

In the following, Angela, a former lawyer, comments on the sacrifices she has made for her three daughters:

I have not gained much as a woman, like I had to give up my career. . . . That’s the way it is, you gain something, but you lose something else. . . . I, as mother, have been able to be close to my daughters . . . I have many dreams for them. I tell them, “You don’t know all the sacrifices that I’d made especially for you [e.g., escaping in the middle of the night from the death squads, giving up her career and political ideals]. You’ll know it when you’re older.”

Angela’s comment makes it clear that the trauma she experienced before her migration continues to influence the mother-daughter relationship. Finding a safe haven for her daughter has involved significant sacrifices. Angela’s comments to her daughters highlight the embedded expectations that come with such sacrifice. It is culturally appropriate for Salvadorian mothers to expect their daughters’ gratitude for their sacrifices. Gratitude is translated into reverence, obedience, and respect for the parents, especially the mother. At the same time, Angela’s choices reflect her interpretation of what mothering in the new country means to her and the re-positioning she herself went through. She shifted from a career-oriented woman to a stay-home mother. She did this with the belief that she was doing what was best for her daughters.

As is true of other mothers in this research, Angela's choices were shaped by the loss of extended family members to support her mothering:

There [El Salvador] you have aunts, brothers to go and ask for help. The kids have someone else to go to complain about their parents. They make suggestions and give you and them advice. You know that they're there to help and protect the family in accordance with our moral and cultural values. You don't have that here....

Consuelo comments on the sacrifices she made by accepting to work outside her chosen profession, doing janitorial work so her daughters could stay in school:

We came with four children. A counselor told us that the money we were getting was not going to be enough for our four children and that our oldest child had to work. I said, "No, I will sacrifice myself [to work in a low paying job] but my children will obtain a career, no matter what." I don't regret anything, but it is hard.

Arguably, Consuelo's impetus to sacrifice so her daughters could go to school comes from the fact that in El Salvador she was part of an upper middle-class milieu where attaining higher education was an entitlement for children. She had taught her daughters the importance of education, and she wanted to continue this value in the new country, even if it meant sacrificing her own self-fulfillment. Like Angela, Consuelo was challenged to make difficult choices. These choices were an extension of what mothering her children meant in her country-of-origin.

Martha comments on the sacrifices she made when she chose to work at night in order to spend more time with her children:

Yes, it is hard to work nights only. It is hard on your body and your overall health.... But I wanted to see them off to school every day, to be home when they came home from school, to have dinner together. I sleep when they are at school.... I also like to volunteer when they have trips or something special at school.... My mother watches them at night. I still call them to say good night though ... I know that I have to choose, but to work to support my children, but I also like to be present for them, specifically in those special moments.... So I just do what I got to do

In the mothers' view, sacrifices were an expected aspect of mothering. However, the mothers in this study perceived that these sacrifices went beyond the hardships they would have endured had they stayed in their country-of-origin, particularly when these mothers were forced to flee their country in search for safety for themselves and their daughters.

Mothers' strategies to support themselves

Two key personal strategies emerged from the interviews. The first involves prayer, and the second concerns the ways in which the mothers learned to be both flexible and assertive.

Mothers' prayers

A number of the mothers talked about the power of prayer as a way to deal with the stresses of acculturation and with their daughters' challenging behaviour. Lourdes, a mother of five, notes:

Yes, it was very hard for me then [daughter's adolescence and challenging behaviour]. It was very hard, very hard. I begged to my God to help me because I felt that I couldn't go on anymore. My religion has helped me a lot. God helped me see things from a different perspective, and to learn to talk to and understand her [daughter]. [He also helped me] to ask for forgiveness and to say, "I made a mistake." It was my prayers that moved me forward and to be more open and to give room for her to tell me that I was making a mistake.

Norma stated:

I think God was the only one who understood me. He gave me the strength that I needed to go on. I couldn't understand her. She couldn't understand me. God was always supporting me.

Several mothers said that their faith was an inner resource that allowed them to cope with acculturation and to counter threats to core Salvadorian values. Lourdes' prayers invited her into a self-reflective process; that is, they allowed her to evaluate her actions and behaviour towards her daughter and to rescue a damaged relationship. Norma's prayers provided her with the inner support that she needed at the time. Meanwhile, Marta, a mother of two, says:

I don't go to church very often. I am too busy running from one place to another. I do pray a lot. I pray to God that he will take care of my children. I pray so they do not encounter racist people in their path.

Nancy stated:

There is so much racism here. I pray that my children do not encounter racist people at school. I do not go to church the way I would like to because I am so busy with work, the kids and in the house. But I never forget to say my daily prayers ...

For the most part, the mothers in this study used their faith as a source of

strength during difficult times with their daughters; they also drew on their faith to cope with the challenges of acculturating in what they experienced as a racist environment.

Becoming assertive, more tolerant, and open to others

Several mothers talked about becoming more tolerant and flexible in order to support their daughters' successful incorporation into Canadian society. Consuelo, a mother of three, comments:

Soon enough I realized that this was another culture and, of course, it was difficult.... Here is not like back home, things are different here. It is hard to raise children here.... I changed a lot here. I became more tolerant.

Roberta concurs:

It was very difficult. I started thinking about the changes that I needed to do because my major goal was to support the children to fit in here.... I became more open and tolerant with my daughters' friends.... I grew fond of them.

Ana comments:

It was very hard to take a look of myself and to see that she [daughter] was right. I was judging her friends negatively only because they had a lot of tattoos.... Once I got to know them; I realized that they were very sweet kids. They were important in my daughter's life and I needed to support her rather than to punish her by prohibiting her to see her friends. When I think about it now I see that I was just trying to protect her the best way I could....

Here, the mothers' desires for their daughter to fit in have led them to make compromises with respect to the behaviour they expect from their daughters.

At the same time, several mothers talked about learning to be more assertive with their children. This departure from the expected unconditional cultural dedication and abnegation occurred because they felt there was too much at stake if their daughters were to lose Salvadorian key values. Concha, a separated stay-at-home mother, says:

I said to her [daughter], "We're going to speak clearly. I want you to be honest and sincere with me. I told you many times that I don't want you to have friends [boys] that wear earrings or that long and messy hair, that have tattoos, or that have those [gesture with her hands] baggy pants." I also said, "All my children have been very obedient and they have listened to me when I told them not to do certain things. ... and you will not be different from them."

Concha may have felt that she needed to be more assertive with her daughter because she was raising her alone: Salvadorian women perceive that they are blamed for separation or divorce. Mothers also perceive that they are blamed if children misbehave. Single mothers, divorced mothers in particular, think that others within the Latino community are closely watching them (Carranza, 2007a). Concha's impetus to keep her daughter in line may have stemmed from her fear of criticism from her ethnic group and church congregation.

Mothers of all social statuses talked about needing to redefine their maternal role to meet the demands of the new country. It appears that the mothers were re-positioning themselves to continue their role as effective mothers. Consuelo and Roberta learned to become more flexible and tolerant; Ana learned to be less judgmental; Concha learned to be more assertive; Ana learned to be more self-reflective and less judgmental.

Conclusion

This study draws attention to the significance of mothering in the lives of immigrant women, noting their resilience and their ability to modify parenting strategies to fit the needs of the new country. As is shown in the study's findings, mothers develop innovative strategies to guide their children through the acculturation process.

The discussion shows how immigration has challenged each mother's unique understanding of what mothering means to her. Mothers are inevitably drawn into a re-assessment of what is needed. Some become more tolerant, others more assertive. Overall, while self-sacrifice remains at the heart of the maternal experience, the expectation of maternal passivity seems to be changing. Having said this, it is important to note the unequal relations between these immigrant women and the Canadian society at large (e. g., exclusion from meaningful employment and lack of recognition of foreign experience and credentials); these are the focal point of the sacrifices they make for the sake of their daughters' "successful" incorporation into Canadian society. The findings indicate that in spite of the Canadian policy on multiculturalism, discrimination and prejudice continues to exist. Government initiatives, Provincial and Federal, which aim to the inclusion and recognition of foreign credentials, are imperative.

The participants' mothering experiences are influenced by several factors. First, their history of colonization along with certain patriarchal practices continues to influence their choices (e. g., remaining single after divorce for the sake of decency). Second, the women are marked by their experiences of loss and trauma due to war and migration, as evident in the heightened emphasis on their daughters' safety. Third, the settlement context, including experiences of systemic racism or downward social mobility, affects their mothering experience. Finally, they are influenced by the challenges of their own acculturation to a foreign country.

The mothers in the study juggle myriad challenges. Yet their work is done

in the privacy of their homes, in silence and without external recognition. For this reason, if for no other, research on immigrant mothers' circumstances and perspectives is critical.

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