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"To Be or Not To Be" is *Not* the Question

Migrant Mothers and Hybridized, Contextualized Parenting

The purpose of this study was to explore the acculturation narratives of migrant mothers living in the United States. Nine women from five different cultures completed in-depth qualitative interviews about their perceptions of themselves as mothers, parenting in heritage cultures, and parenting in the U.S. Transcribed interviews were analyzed using an inductive methodology that identified emergent themes across and within narratives. Findings suggest that change through intercultural contact includes multiple domains that may change at different times and rates. These include cultural practices, values, and identifications. In addition, the mothers in our study described accepting and rejecting aspects of multiple cultures as they engage in a type of hybridized, contextualized parenting that "picks the best from both worlds." We suggest that mothers' lives need to be interpreted through a lens of intersectionality that acknowledges the importance of women's social locations.

In the short story, "The Arrangers of Marriage," Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie describes the following exchange:

> "Look at the people who shop here; they are the ones who immigrate and continue to act as if they are back in their countries." He gestured, dismissively, toward a woman and her two children, who were speaking Spanish. "They will never move forward unless they adapt to America." (175)

Two aspects of this quote are particularly noteworthy. First, the narrator expresses the view that migrants must shed their heritage identities in order to adopt and re-assemble new, more culturally acceptable identities. Second, the exchange is focused on a migrant mother and the role she plays in determining how, when, and where her family acculturates. Although Adiche's short story is fictional, the themes in her passage are similar to those found in the psychological literature, namely that mothers serve as cultural gatekeepers who best serve themselves and their children when they embrace American values and practices. This approach over-simplifies the acculturation process, ignoring the possibility that mothers are likely to benefit when they "pick and choose" parenting strategies from both heritage and host cultures. To capture these complexities, acculturation must be viewed as a multidimensional process that is, among other things, domain specific and linked to mothers' personal histories. With this in mind, the purpose of this study was to examine how migrant mothers living in the United States interpret their parenting practices, values, and identifications as situated between and within two cultural traditions. To achieve this goal, we analyzed the personal narratives of nine women, using a fluid, multi-dimensional view of acculturation.

To Be or Not to Be: Acculturation as a Dominant Discourse

Over the last 40 years, the psychological literature on immigrants has been dominated by work that examines how migrants acculturate when they relocate to a new culture. Within this research context, acculturation is defined as "a process of cultural and psychological change in cultural groups, families and individuals following intercultural contact" (Berry 69). Although research on this topic has garnered a tremendous amount of interest and attention, recent criticisms highlight several conceptual limitations in this body of work, many of which are particularly salient to our understanding of migrant mothers.

One such criticism is consistent with the Adiche quote at the beginning of this paper, namely that acculturation is often portrayed as a "one way, psychological process relevant only to immigrants in their journey toward cultural shedding, behavioural shifting and eventual full absorption into the dominant culture" (Ngo). Applied to mothering, Westernized parenting beliefs and practices are implicitly (and often explicitly) positioned as the ideal against which migrant mothers are compared; mothers who are more willing to adapt their parenting to the demands of the new culture are viewed as better parents. At a minimum, this approach fails to acknowledge that views on motherhood are intertwined with class and race privileges (Romero). Moreover, it does not explain why research has provided inconsistent findings on the association between mothers' acculturation status and children's functioning. Mothers who adopt strategies consistent with their new culture's values and lifestyles, for example, seem to have children with better social skills; however, mothers' acculturation is not related to children's behavior or externalizing problems (Pawliuk et al.; Shahim).

John Berry (72) challenged the idea that migrants need to discard or ignore their cultural roots when they join a new culture with his two-pronged approach to cultural change. In his model, immigrants are presumed to make two conscious decisions, one involving if and how much they want to maintain their cultural heritage; the other related to the degree to which they want to participate in the larger, multicultural society. Decisions regarding these two orientations result in four possible acculturation strategies: Integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. Some immigrants, for example, choose to disregard their own heritage, preferring to fully participate in their new culture (assimilation) while others choose to embrace their cultural heritage while avoiding new cultural interactions (separation). Still others prefer to accept both dominant and heritage cultures (integration) or neither culture (marginalization).

In addition to providing a more complex view of acculturation, Berry and Sam (297) make several conceptual contributions that are salient to migrant mothers. First, they point out that migrants are often able to consciously choose an acculturation strategy that best fits their values, interests, and circumstances. These acculturative "preferences" are not static; rather they change across time and space. Thus, a woman might choose (or be forced to "choose") assimilation in some areas of her life, separation in others. Mothers may be particularly prone to diverse acculturation strategies as they socialize their children to be successful in a culture that endorses values and beliefs that are foreign or distasteful. This challenges research that places migrants into categories that are exclusive and exhaustive—research that labels an immigrant as either assimilated or integrated, marginalized or separated.

In a related manner, Seth Schwartz et al. suggest that an individual's approach to acculturation may differ across three main domains, including cultural practices, values, and identities. These issues are particularly interesting in the context of mothering across cultures. Migrant mothers, for example, must make hundreds of "acculturation decisions" that traverse many different areas of parenting, including moral, prudential, and conventional domains (Smetana). These decisions may be particularly difficult in cultures such as the United States where broad socialization patterns result in a wide range of culturally acceptable parenting strategies (Arnett 619). Accordingly, migrant mothers must first decide whether or not they are going to embrace new or heritage-based parenting practices. If they decide to integrate or assimilate their parenting with the dominant culture, they must then decide what aspects of the culture they wish to endorse (e.g., conservative or liberal parenting values).This assumes that cultural changes are multidimensional, developing independently and at different rates (Schwartz et al. 244-246). Moreover, it prioritizes process over outcome. To acknowledge that migrant mothers' differentially negotiate acculturation across multiple domains is to foreground the fact that migrants differ. Thus, it is dangerous to assume that acculturation unfolds in similar ways for all migrants, regardless of personal background, characteristics, or social location. Clearly a mother migrating to the U.S. to begin a Ph.D. program, for example, faces different challenges than a mother migrating as a refugee to escape persecution. To ignore individual differences is to assume a universalist approach that is acontextual, adevelopmental, and ahistorical (Tardiff-Williams and Fisher 153).

The Current Study

In response to some of the conceptual and theoretical limitations found in the acculturation literature, some researchers have called for a "re-thinking" of how social scientists study, analyze, and interpret migrant experiences. This includes a greater appreciation for the complexities of ***what*** aspects of immigrants' lives change—both internally and externally—after cultural contact occurs and how and why those changes take place in different contexts.

In other words, it is not enough to know that some migrant mothers choose an integration strategy of acculturation while others choose to fully assimilate. We also need to understand how mothers negotiate the myriad settings and situations that confront them in native and new cultures and how and why they make different parenting decisions. This requires an inducative research strategy that allows migrant mothers to define, interpret, and make meaning out of their acculturation journey. In particular, we were interested in three questions, as follows: 1.) How do migrant mothers perceive their own parents and parenting in their native culture? 2.) What are migrant mothers' perceptions of American parents and parenting? and 3.) How do migrant mothers construe their own parenting? Given the nature of these questions, open-ended, qualitative interviews were conducted to explore mothers' subjective experiences and meaning-making.

Method

Participants

Mothers were recruited to participate in this study through fliers placed throughout communities in the New York City area. Those who participated ranged in age from 39 to 59 (mean age = 46 years, *SD* = 6.57). Five women moved to the United States from Jamaica; others emigrated from Bermuda, Bolivia, Israel, and India. At the time of the interview, 77 percent were married and the women had been living in the United States for a number of years, ranging from five to fifty ($M = 20$ years, $SD = 12.76$). The number of children of each woman ranged from one to five ($M = 3.33$, $SD = 1.50$). All participants reported that they talk to family from their country of origin; however, only 55 percent speak to family once a week or more. Level of education ranged from high school (33 percent) to advanced graduate degrees (33 percent). The majority of women were employed.

Procedure and Analytic Strategy

Face-to-face interviews were conducted at a mutually agreed upon time and place and involved a variety of questions about mothers' personal histories and life experiences. In particular, we asked mothers to describe their beliefs about how they were raised in their heritage cultures, how they are currently raising their children in the United States, and how they believe "typical" Americans raise their children. This allowed us to examine parenting perceptions within and across cultural contexts. Although the interview consisted of a specific set of questions, mothers were encouraged to share anecdotes and stories and to expand upon any topics that they felt were important. All interviews were taped and subsequently transcribed verbatim. To ensure confidentiality, a pseudonym was assigned to each woman.

Analysis of mothers' narratives was based on an inductive, exploratory methodology in the tradition of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). As such, *a priori* theoretical categories did not drive the qualitative data analysis; rather, analyses were based on patterns and themes that emerged from the interviews. All interviews were coded for common themes by two trained researchers. An initial list of emergent themes was identified through consensus coding. As a second step, researchers coded all material independently; inter-rater reliability exceeded 90 percent.

Results

The following portion of this paper describes the themes that were most salient to mothers' experiences of parenting in United States. Following a brief section that addresses how the mothers described transitioning into a new culture, we discuss the three most prominent themes that emerged across mothers' interviews: Respect as a cultural practice, hybridized parenting, and contextualized parenting.

The Process of Cultural Transition

To provide the cultural context for the women we interviewed, our first set of questions asked mothers to reflect on the circumstances under which they migrated to the United States. The stories were as diverse as the countries from which the women left. Some women moved as young children with their parents, others moved to follow a husband with a good job. Still others came for a visit and never returned. Importantly, the majority of the women we interviewed began their sojourn to a new culture in a state of ambivalence or resistance, regardless of the age at which they made the move. This is illustrated in the words of Beatriz, a woman who immigrated from Bolivia at the age of six:

> *You know those 'I love NY' pins? I scratched an 'X' on the heart and I used to walk around with that. My grandmother used to say, "You ungrateful little girl, you're in the capitol of the world, you should be happy." I was like, "Blah, I hate New York."*

While Beatrice moved because her parents wanted to give her a life with more opportunities, Ishani, a woman originally from India, illustrates the process of deciding to move to another country from the perspective of a mother:

> *I came in 2001 with my daughter. My husband had come earlier in the year to do a Ph.D .in neuroscience so we came basically to be with him. I initially didn't want to come; I was working as a journalist at a magazine and I thought I was going to go places. I was like, "Oh do whatever you want. I'm not coming." I grew up without a father.… So I didn't want her to go through that, so we came. I heard terrible things about the immigration process and I didn't have a hard time. But it wasn't so bad logistically but the emotional things were tough.* (Ishani, India)

At a minimum, these examples refute popular images of America as a place where everyone wants to live. In addition, they position children, and by extension parents, at the forefront of immigration decisions. It is important to note that the majority of women had their children after they moved to the United States. Ashani (from India) and Hope (from Namibia) were two exceptions; both had children before emigrating.

Respect as a Cultural Practice

Our second set of questions asked mothers to describe their perceptions of the parenting practices and beliefs prominent in their cultures of origin and in the United States. In comparing answers across the two questions, the most common theme that emerged across all nine narratives involved how respect and discipline is cultivated and approached differently in diverse cultural contexts. On the one hand, most mothers described strict expectations in their native cultures that children "need to respect … even if they see a teacher or an old person, they need to give that respect" (Grace, Namibia). This was clearly articulated by Beatriz, a woman who grew up in Bolivia.

> *Disrespect was not an option … In South America, the eldest daughter is like the parent, she does everything. The eldest cousin down there, she's called little mother. That's her nick name, 'Moma chica.' That's her nickname. My mother always told me, "You were born to help me." Okay, that's what she would say to me, "You were born to help me." Period.*

An emphasis on respect in heritage cultures was often contrasted with the view that American mothers are indulgent in their approach to interacting with their children, as illustrated in the following interview excerpts:

> *I think American parents give in … you know, kids bat their eyes and cry twice and they're off punishment. We tend to … if you're grounded for six months, you're grounded for six months. White people discipline different.* (Hope, Bermuda)

> *Um, I think they're different in some ways and similar in others. I think that all parents teach their kids that they would like them to be respectful to adults, contributing to society, that sort of thing, but I think what is different is the way we go about it. I think the American parents are a little more lax in disciplining, while the immigrant parent is more, discipline is very important. We feel like when we speak once, we should be heard, we shouldn't have to say, "Suzy, I said no, Suzy, I said no, Suzy, I said no." Yeah, once we say no, that's it. So I think it's just the style that is different, not the end results or what they're trying to achieve, but it's the style that is different.* (Durene, Jamaica)

One exception to this was seen in the narrative of Azalia, a woman who immigrated to the United States from Israel 30 years ago. She states:

> *[I am an] American parent— supportive, a right-there-kind-of-a-parent, parent who gets into the mud, who gets into the sandbox with the kids, a parent who, "Sure, let's play monopoly," or a parent who's also a friend.… And your child has to see that you can be silly, too, that you can be goofy and silly and do silly things, and you can get down to their level in certain ways so that they don't feel that they always have to be looking up to you. They can be looking at you, not necessarily up to you. So I think that's important.*

It is interesting to note that even Azalia, a migrant mother who identifies as an American, described American mothers as permissive and uninterested in enforcing a hierarchy of power. Thus, across all the interviews we conducted, migrant mothers focused on the ways in which parental authority is used differently in parent-child relationships as a function of cultural orientation.

Hybridized Parenting

Although the mothers in our study were often quick to identify different parenting orientations across cultures, this did not typically result in an outright rejection of American values and practices. In fact, most of the mothers described problems with heritage parenting practices and strengths of American parenting strategies. Interestingly, examples of this often involved mothers demanding respect from children (a perceived heritage norm), while also respecting and honoring their children’s minds and opinions (a perceived American norm).

> *I was raised without a voice. How I was raised was if my mom said move the book, I couldn’t ask her where she wanted me to move it to, I just moved it. If it was the wrong place, she’d let me know afterwards. However, I didn’t want to raise my children that way cause I believe that children should have a voice, just a respectful one. And so I taught my children that they could disagree with me, you know they could speak up, you know, and explain to me what they needed to explain, but always in a respectful way.… I’ve found that some people too, even from the Caribbean, has started to adopt American ways.* (Durene, Jamica)

> *My mother allowed my father to punish me so much, to allow a lot of his insecurities to be lifted upon me … I am different. I explain to them, you know, I believe in explaining why I am doing the things that I am doing. And I believe in what I said, you gain respect, you don’t just obligate somebody to respect you.* (Beatriz, Bolivia)

> *So although I feel I’ve adopted more of a Bermudian parenting style, there’s definitely some differences. Like my children won’t argue with me, but they feel free to express themselves with me in a certain way.* (Grace, Bermuda)

These quotes illustrate how some immigrant mothers prefer to “pick and choose” from a tableau of cultural practices, beliefs and practices that appear in both heritage and receiving cultures. As Ishani, a mother originally from India, stated, "I like to think that I take the best from every culture." Other examples included:

> *I take the best from both worlds. That's how I do it. You know, they're not living in Jamaica, they live here, so for the most part, this is gonna have more of influence of what I do, how I do, but I still balance with my values and how I was raised. I pick from both.* (Eden, Jamaica)

> *I have my Jamaican experience and I have my American experience and if possible, I try and put them together to make sure that I have a way around doing it. Um, I have two daughters, right, my children, so I do admit, I wouldn't say I'm a typical Jamaican parent nor would I say an American parent, I am just wanting to be … the best of both worlds Whatever work, whatever is good for our culture, in my estimation, I pull together, so I do it well in my eyes.* (Chyrah, Jamaica)

As these examples illustrate, the mothers in our study described a hybridized form of parenting that entails a selective strategy of endorsing and/or rejecting elements from multiple cultures. Although this strategy shares certain aspects of Berry and Sam's integration style of acculturation, our findings add another layer of understanding to how and why integration might be achieved. Berry describes integration as occurring "when there is an interest in both maintaining one's original culture while engaging in in daily interactions with other groups … some degree of cultural integrity is maintained, while at the same time the individual seeks to participate as an integral part of the larger social network" (297). The mothers in our study described much more than shared "engagements" with heritage and host cultures. Instead, they described a deliberate process of evaluating and interpreting parenting norms across cultures, creating a "new normal" that, in the words of several of the mothers, "takes the best from both worlds."

Contextualized Parenting

In addition to choosing different cultural practices and values, the mothers we interviewed described selecting when they and their children should endorse different aspects of their identities. In general, our findings suggest that migrant mothers often shift identities (and expect their children to follow suit) depending on the contexts in which they find themselves. For some, distinctions were made between the home and the external society, as described by Grace, a mother originally from Namibia.

> *Is what I tell my children. I say, "When you are outside, you are in America. But when you are in my house, you are in Africa. You need to know the culture. Here you need to know that in the house we have African culture. You greet, you go in the kitchen and prepare food and you prepare something for somebody.… They say, "Momma, we in America"'and I say, "No! No. You need to know where you come from or you are going to forget your culture."*

This speaks to one of the challenges faced by migrant mothers—parents must negotiate their own acculturation while simultaneously socializing their children to be successful in a culture that may endorse values and beliefs that are foreign or distasteful. One strategy mothers adopt for dealing with this challenge involves utilizing different acculturation strategies depending on whether or not mothers are in public or private spheres. This supports the idea that acculturation is a dynamic, context-dependent process rather than a finalized "state of being" (Berry and Sam). This was further evidenced in the fine-grained distinctions some mothers made between different environments, most commonly based on the ethnic composition of the setting.

> *I used to work as a nanny and had to take a train to get down to the city. I took my baby with me and put her in a school nearby. On the number one train which goes on the Upper West Side, I felt I could be relaxed with my daughter. White people would offer us a seat. It was surprising to me that they thought I needed to rest. On the number two train which goes up to the Bronx, I was with my daughter and I felt that I had to keep a tight leash on her and the whole train was watching me to see if I disciplined her enough.* (Chyrah, Jamaica)

Although the mothers tended to focus on how their identities changed in different American contexts, half of them also described identity challenges when they returned to their heritage cultures. Speaking about when she returns to India for a visit, Ishani describes the following:

> *I change a lot. It's a different culture; I mean I have a lot more insularity here which I don't have there. Nobody comes and tells me what I have to do here, but in India everyone is in everybody else's face. So when we stayed in India we had a neighbor who lived in the building that we were staying in. She had just lost her daughter and this woman kind of adopted my daughter. Even when we go back now, it's not that she tells you that you need to do something but it's more like, "Oh, she needs to do this." Or "Oh is she wearing that?" My parenting does change even in my short time there.*

These examples suggest that, for some migrant mothers, maternal identities are negotiated as contexts and environments change and shift, reflecting an intersection between the internal and external worlds.

Patterns of Emergent Themes as a Function of Mother's Backgrounds

As a final step in this study, we examined emergent themes as a function of how long mothers had lived in the United States, how many children they had, and country of origin. Although our sample was too small for statistical analyses, we identified several interesting patterns that raise questions for future work. First, all nine mothers described cross-cultural differences in the expectations that mothers have for how their children should interact with adults. Thus, respect (and disciplinary strategies surrounding issues of respect) were salient for mothers regardless of the number of children they have, country of origin, or time spent in the U.S. This is a striking finding given that we utilized open-ended questions that let mothers define important themes. Accordingly, mothers' beliefs about their authority and how children should interact with adults were particularly important topics that mothers seem to spend a good deal of time thinking about. In addition, this is a concern that is often intertwined with mothers' memories of being parented. For some mothers, for example, childhood recollections were used as a rationale for why they chose to modify heritage parenting practices to align with (though not absorb or emulate) American parenting practices.

In a related manner, a second pattern involved hybridized parenting. Seven out of nine migrant mothers described examples of "picking and choosing" parenting strategies from two cultures. The two mothers who did not describe this mixing of cultural traditions included Azalia, a mother who has lived in the U.S. the longest (50 years; moved from Israel) and Hope, a mother who has lived in the U.S. the shortest period of time (5 years; moved from Namibia). Given that Azalia described feeling "American" and Hope described little connection to the United States, it seems reasonable to consider that migrants' retention of heritage beliefs decrease over time until they have been replaced by the host culture's beliefs. Thus, Azalia and Hope may have described hybridized parenting for very different reasons—one because she has yet to embrace any American parenting strategies and the other because she only endorses American ways of parenting. No other patterns were identified.

Conclusion

As we expected, mothers narrated a complex set of parenting beliefs, practices and identities that went beyond a simple acceptance or rejection of their heritage and receiving cultures. In fact, without any prompting or probing, mothers described maintaining *and* discarding aspects of their native culture while adopting *and* rejecting aspects of American culture. This challenges traditional models of acculturation that place immigrants into broad categories based on an overarching evaluation of how much they identify with their new and old cultures. Instead, our findings lend some support to research that advances a "fusion model" of globalization in which intercultural contact may result in new cultural forms (Hermans and Kempen 1113). This was seen most clearly when mothers described the merging of dominant parenting styles related to respect.

In addition to evidence of hybridized parenting strategies, immigrant mothers described changes across a variety of domains, including the ways in which they think about themselves and parenting, the values they endorse, and their typical parenting practices. This supports the work of Schwartz et al. who advocate for a multidimensional study of acculturation that considers all aspects of migrants' inner and outer worlds. In a related manner, we found that mothers often described different domains changing at different times. Thus, a mother might parent in a particular way (a behavioral domain) even though her beliefs (a value domain) do not align with her actions. Two mothers, for example, described how Americans are overly protective and concerned about safety. Both mothers explained that they "go along" with safety precautions such as driving their children to school and never leaving them home alone, although they do not necessarily see the point. These types of examples illustrated how changes between domains may not always align.

Finally, our findings suggest that mothers' identities as parents shape and shift depending on contextual features of the environment. While this is neither surprising nor something that is unique to migrant mothers, it does speak to the importance of considering a perspective of intersectionality, a lens that necessitates an understanding of women as they exist in various social locations (Mahalingam and Leu 240). Although the mothers we interviewed shared stories of identity-related changes that occurred in and outside the home, train, and schoolyard, it was specifically in the company of other mothers that identity issues were most salient. Importantly, it was not typically American mothers who caused the migrant mothers to feel marginalized; rather, mothers from their own heritage cultures—either fellow immigrants or those who remain in their native culture—often made them question their identity as woman and mothers. An interesting question for future research involves exploring how mothers of different races, ethnicities, sexualities, and socioeconomic groups influence identity-related processes for other mothers.

In closing, we hope that this study adds to the conversation on how migrant mothers develop and change through intercultural contact. That said, our findings must be considered in light of the fact that we interviewed a small sample of women, most of whom were fairly educated and living comfortably in middle class communities. Within this sample, we also had an over-representation of mothers from the Caribbean. Moreover, all of these women spoke fluent English, a factor that in and of itself strongly affects acculturative experiences. Unfortunately, we were unable to speak with women who are in the United States illegally or who arrived as refugees. It is clear that women who are marginalized within an already marginalized group are likely to have different narratives, experiences, and ways of viewing themselves and their parenting.

With this in mind, we would like to advocate for more research, done by more researchers, on the experiences of immigrant mothers. As inaccurate rhetoric about migrants with children waxes and wanes to the beat of America's political, economic, and cultural climate, public policy and opinion are actively being shaped. These public narratives paint immigrant mothers as "over-breeders" who are unfit to raise children; freeloaders who come to the United States to breed and, by extension, deplete the social and environmental resources available to deserving American families. Aside from illustrating xenophobic inaccuracies, these narratives simplify the experiences of immigrant women by making gross generalizations that treat all non-native mothers as a homogeneous group of women with similar histories, beliefs, receptions, and reasons for migrating to the United States. Such portrayals are damaging at every level of the macrosystem. As one of the woman we interviewed poignantly stated, "We need to come together, like the United Nations … American women, European women, African women. All women." We couldn't agree more.

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