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Shared experiences among Mexican American mixed-status families

David Ramos *

Department of Sociology, University of California-Irvine, Irvine, California, United States.

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences, beliefs, values, and norms among Mexican-American mixed-status families, living in the Californian cities of South Los Angeles, South Gate, and Santa Ana. Through a qualitative approach, 5 Mexican-American mixed-status family members were interviewed and given the opportunity to tell their story and share their unique experiences. The qualitative data was then analyzed to search for patterns, in which 3 themes emerged. The main findings from this study revealed that Mexican-American mixed-status families are conscious of their undocumented status, however, they manage to separate their uncertainties of deportation from living ordinary, and productive lives with their children. These findings suggest a high level of resilience, which was facilitated through the heavy utilization of coping resources, which included the ethnic immigrant enclave, companionship or fictive kin, transnational ties, and their children's language and cultural skills.

Keywords: Mexican-American; Mixed-status; Families; Experience; Undocumented immigrants; Resilience; Qualitative research

1. Introduction

The United States has inspired waves of immigration, in which people uproot their lives and journey across borders in search of the "American dream". Upon arriving in the United States, these immigrants settle down, begin to work and eventually start a family. Unfortunately, anti-immigration policies prevent some newly arrived immigrants from receiving legal documentation status. For this reason, undocumented immigrants and their families face unique challenges and shared experiences when attempting to incorporate into American society.

One of these ethnic groups, who commonly suffer from an undocumented status, are Mexican-American mixed-status families. These mixed-status families consist of undocumented Mexico-born adults and documented U.S.-born children, living in the same household. Their Mexican culture and undocumented status are important layers that determine their life course, as they navigate through American society. Both culture and documentation status must be considered to understand the unique family relationships and lived experiences in these families.

This research will focus on the lived experiences of Mexican-American mixed-status families living in the California cities of South Los Angeles, Santa Ana, and South Gate. Through in-depth interviews with mixed-status family members, the narrative of their lives was depicted and categorized into themes and sub-themes, to tell a clear and interconnected story. Throughout this research, I will argue that Mexican-American mixed-status families overcome the challenges of an undocumented status and manage to live fulfilling lives, through their collective fearlessness and use of coping mechanisms.

* Corresponding author: David Ramos

2. Literature Review

This research has been influenced by scholarly literature in three main areas of focus. The first body of literature will focus on the definitions of success held by Mexican-American immigrants as they compare their life in the United States to their lives left behind in Mexico. The second body of literature is on the social support networks that Mexican-American immigrants depend on. The third grouping of literature emphasizes the role of the Mexican ethnic enclave and the institutions and businesses that occupy the ethnically homogeneous community. These groupings of literature are fundamental depictions of the immigrant experience and offer an “immigrant perspective” that I will use when conducting my own interviews. Despite past research, there remains a gap in knowledge because the literature does not focus on the undocumented immigrant experience within a mixed-status family, and for this reason my own research aims to fill in the gaps of information needed to describe the mixed-status family narrative.

In the first grouping of literature on defining success, author Menjivar et al. (2012) state that “The definition of a successful migration today has been reduced to simply surviving the trip. Immigrants and their families understand [and] have accepted the dangerous terms of migration and settlement.” (Menjivar et al. 2012, pg.1381). In another similar study, Dreby (2012) adds on to the concept of a successful migration process in which an immigrant manages to successfully travel across the border and states that “Due to the militarization of the U.S.– Mexican border it became more difficult for migrants to return to families in Mexico, many either brought their families with them or formed families here.” (Dreby 2012, pg. 831).

These findings provide evidence that create a vivid depiction of the harsh conditions immigrants face when traveling across the border. For this reason, simply stepping on American land and starting a family is considered success. The findings drawn from these studies will resonate with the undocumented parents in my own research, because they too share the experience of migrating across the dividing border. For my own research, I will go a step further and argue that the gratitude for being on American land will be more intense among undocumented immigrants because they face the threat of deportation. Another layer, which both Menjivar (2012) and Dreby (2012) fail to address, is how the citizen children of undocumented parents are the main reason why they are attached to the United States, since leaving the country means being separated from their children. This layer will be acknowledged in my research through interview questions on this subject.

Literature on immigrant success, also points out that the educational attainment of their children is arguably the most significant source of perceived success in America. Zhou (1997) agrees with this notion and states that “Attending school, attaining knowledge and skills that may be capitalized upon in future labor markets is a crucial first step toward successful adaptation to American society for immigrant children and children of immigrants.” (Zhou 1997, pg. 75). For this reason, immigrant parents begin to work hard and long hours in low-paying jobs that require difficult labor, due to their undocumented status preventing them from finding employment in the formal economy. This ethos placed on working hard for their children is reflected in Parra-Cardona’s (2006) research findings on Mexican migrant farmworkers, who describe working in their agricultural jobs by using the phrase “Trabajando duro todos los dias” (Parra-Cardona et al. 2006 pg.366) which translates to “working hard every day” in the fields. Along with hard work ethic, findings from Mexican migrant farmworkers show that “An emphasis on family was described as they reported that the well-being of their children was their priority in life.” (Parra-Cardona et al. 2006, pg.371). Once again, the literature findings show that Mexican-American immigrants not only find success and pride themselves on their children, but they also invest their time and money into their education.

While Parra-Cardona’s (2006) literature shows the immigrant determination to work hard, its shortcoming is that the Mexican-American immigrants in his study were legally authorized to work in the United States. Since this literature does not focus on the undocumented, the readers fail to see how simply finding a job is virtually impossible when you do not have legal documentation. Through my research, I will show how undocumented parents in mixed-status families struggle to find jobs and that once they do find employment it is usually in the underground economy.

The second body of literature focuses on the groups of people that provide social support to Mexican-American mixed-status families. These supportive groups of people make up an immigrant’s social network, which involves “Connections [such as] communication, mutual recognition, and shared participation in some activity, flows of goods or services, and other forms of consequential interaction” (Tilly 2007, pg.7). One example of a support network is the immigrant’s extended family, who are often left behind in Mexico. The emotional support from family ties in their native country, is defined by Tilly (2007) as “Relations between emigrants and households at the origin provid[ing] mutual support, as well as reinforcing the migrants’ longer-term claims on membership in the sending community” (Tilly 2007, pg.13).

In addition to emotional support, Tilly believes that immigrant family members also help them retain a sense of ethnic identity when immersed in American culture. According to Held (2016), this support between family members and immigrant parents is reciprocal, such as in cases where “Immigrants earn higher wages in the United States and send a portion of these wages to family remaining in their home countries.” (Held 2017, pg.75). Held (2016) makes the distinction that family members often provide emotional support, whereas immigrant parents often provide financial support in the form of remittances.

In my own research, I plan to extend these findings through a new perspective not used by Tilly (2007) or Held (2016). Both authors do not mention the use of mass media to communicate with family in their home country. I believe that new technologies, such as Facebook and Skype, allow for newly arrived immigrants to maintain an even stronger relationship with their family in their home country. I will argue that because of the advances in communication, the immigrants I interview will experience a sense of closeness to their transnational family, despite their distance. Another factor which was not discussed in the literature is that undocumented immigrants suffer from not being able to freely travel back to their home country. The respondents in my interviews will share their feelings about being isolated in a country that they could not leave because they may never be able to come back.

Another source of social support, that often goes overlooked, is the support from their own children. Most research on children’s contribution to the immigrant household focus on language brokering, which Weisskirch (2013) describes as when “Immigrant parents enlist their children to serve as ‘language brokers’, where they translate and interpret face-to-face communication, written text, and a variety of documents” (Weisskirch 2013, pg.1147). In these families, children take the role of interpreters as they help their parents understand the native language and navigate through an unfamiliar new country. Through research on Salvadoran and Guatemalan immigrants, Menjivar further described the child broker role and states that “In addition to earning incomes at an early age, oftentimes children act as ‘cultural brokers’ since they tend to become more quickly acquainted with the new culture through their schools.” (Menjivar 2006, pg.235). Furthermore, Eksner et al. (2012) provide some examples of where language and cultural brokering takes place, such as “[children] often translate in banks, government offices, stores, restaurants, doctor’s offices, on the phone, and in face-to-face interactions” (Eksner et al. 2012, pg.199). This type of reciprocal relationship is particularly present in Mexican-American mixed-status families, in which children contribute their English language and cultural skills.

The literature on language brokering fails to compare the utilization differences between documented and undocumented immigrants. I believe that the frequency and intensity of language brokering is different among mixed-status families. My reason for hypothesizing this is because the undocumented parents in mixed-status families are less skilled in the language and culture of the United States because they lack the confidence and resources to pursue American education. This leads me to believe that undocumented parents depend on the help of their children much more than their documented counterparts. I will put this theory to the test when I interview undocumented parents and their children and ask them about their use of language brokering.

Another form of support, comes from the help and companionship of close friends or fictive kin. Kemper (1982) uses the word “compadrazgo” throughout his research, to describe “The term fictive kinship to refer[s] to the compadrazgo, although [he] also considers it to be a system of ritualized personal relations” (Kemper 1982, pg. 28).”. Kemper goes on to describe an example in which an immigrant would seek support from their “compadre” such as “Migrants [who go] to the city make extensive use of their ties with compadres, and kins men too, in finding a place to live and a first job” (Kemper 1982, pg.25). Kemper’s research contributes to the concept of “compadrazgo” as a form of social support that is specifically prevalent in Mexican culture. For this reason, the symbolic act of becoming compadres follows Mexican immigrants who settle in the United States and form “compadre” relationships which they benefit from.

The context of Kemper’s (1982) research is limited because his research is on Mexican citizens who have not immigrated to America. Although his research is not on immigrants, I believe that his findings are still useful to the understanding of the immigrant experience because the Mexican immigrants in my study will carry over their traditional “compadrazgo” relationships when migrating from Mexico to the United States. I believe that once Mexican immigrants arrive in the United States they will form new relationships that are similar to “compadrazgo” in Mexico. Another layer of these relationships in my own study, will be that I believe undocumented immigrants will show a pattern of forming a larger number of relationships that they can depend on for support.

The third grouping of literature studied how the ethnic enclave plays a role in the immigrant experience. Logan et al. (2002) defines the ethnic enclave as being characterized by “ethnic character visible through the observation of people in public places, the names of shops or the languages found on signs or spoken by clerks or patrons, or by community institutions such as churches, social clubs, and associations.” (Logan et al. 2012, pg.304). Consistent with Logan’s

analysis, an important institution that can be found in the ethnic enclave, which serves the immigrant community, is the ethnic church. Menjivar (2003) describes the ethnic church as a place where “Immigrants are already familiar with the churches they come to join or found, [and] also the church is perhaps one of the most supportive and welcoming institutions for immigrants, particularly for those who face extremely difficult circumstances.” (Menjivar 2003, pg. 25). In other words, the ethnic church serves as a sanctuary to newly arrived immigrants who have little or no ties to rely on. Ecklund et al. (2013) expands the understanding of the ethnic church by describing the church clergy as “Leaders [who] believed that doing community service for those outside the Latino community was important” (Ecklund et al. 2013, pg.382). Additional findings from Ecklund’s research that directly relate to immigrants from Mexico, is that “The leaders of the MEO [church] not only acknowledge the heavy Mexican ethnicity of their organization, but also accept it” (Ecklund et al. 2013, pg.382).

This literature on the ethnic church only provides a general description of the support that they provide for Mexican immigrants. In my own research, I plan to cite specific activities or services that the church offers to immigrants. More specifically, I want to find out how the ethnic church helps their members who do not have legal documentation. I believe that my qualitative data can possibly show support that can be in the form of legal advice or bringing together undocumented members to share advice. Both Menjivar (2003) and Ecklund (2013) do not mention the specific examples of support given to undocumented immigrants from the ethnic church.

Another benefit from living in an ethnic enclave is having a community of Latino peers. According to Boyd (1989), these ethnic enclaves facilitate the integration process of new immigrants through “Village based networks and customs (such as festivals), membership in ethnic associations and shared cultural and ethnic origins. These personal networks [within enclaves] provide food, shelter, job information and contacts, information on health care and social services, recreation and emotional [support].” (Boyd 1989, pg.651). In addition, Sanders et al. (1987) comments on the ethnic enclave economy as developing when “Most immigrant groups initially settle in ethnically concentrated communities and generate a few small businesses to serve immediate, specialized consumption needs.” (Sanders 1987, pg.769).

Both researchers acknowledge the presence of institutions that are run by and serve the immigrant community. However, Sanders disagrees that ethnic enclaves are always beneficial, and argues that “Ethnic enclaves provide immigrant groups with a base of social support and cohesion that is crucial for those who are slow to acquire the language and cultural skills of the host society. But as long as immigrants lack the cultural and language skills of the host country, their employment opportunities are usually limited to relatively poor paying jobs.” (Sanders 1987, pg.747).

I believe that Sanders brings up an important point, which is that the ethnic enclave can result in negative experiences among immigrants, such as being stagnant in a low-paying job. However, Sanders’ research does not take into account the unique perspective of the ethnic community for undocumented immigrants. I believe that another negative aspect of the ethnic community that will emerge in my interviews is that the concentration of Mexican undocumented immigrants in one geographical location can result in targeted discrimination or legal vulnerability. Both Boyd (1989) and Sanders (1987) are influential to my own research, by allowing me to consider both the positive and negative sides of the ethnic community. The questions in my interviews will be framed to get both the positive and negative realities of the ethnic community.

Overall, these three groupings of the literature offer a general view of the immigrant experience with very little mention of the unique challenges associated with being an undocumented immigrant. For this reason, I want to devote my own research to focusing on undocumented immigrants and their mixed-status family, to make new discoveries into their lived experiences.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Instrument

In my research, I utilized a qualitative approach, with the goal of gaining an in-depth understanding into the lives of Mexican-American mixed-status families. The qualitative data was collected by conducting a total of 5 in-person interviews. The interviews consisted of 3 long, structured interviews, and 2 informal, unstructured interviews. The structured interviews lasted approximately one hour each and the unstructured interviews lasted twenty to thirty minutes. The interview questions consisted of open-ended questions that gave the participants the opportunity to tell their story or share a unique experience. In addition, I conducted library research that included peer-reviewed articles from sociological journals on Mexican-Americans. After the library research, I reviewed the literature, to establish the foundation of knowledge on which my research is building upon.

According to Brinkman (2013), a main advantage to unstructured interviews is that they attempt to “Understand themes of the lived everyday world from the subjects’ own perspectives. This kind of interview seeks to obtain descriptions of the interviewees’ lived world. It comes close to an everyday conversation, but as a professional interview it has purpose and involves a specific approach and technique” (Brinkman 2013, pg.31). Another advantage that Brinkman mentions is that “Face-to-face interviews reveal the, the private self of the subject” (Brinkman 2013, pg.15). A limitation to the interview method is that you are not able to generalize the findings to a larger population because the data only applies to the sample. For these reasons, I believe the qualitative approach and use of interviews was the appropriate research method in my study on the lives of Mexican-American mixed-status families.

3.2. Participants

The sample-population in my study was a total of 5 individuals who all belong to a Mexican-American mixed-status family. The participants were gathered from the California cities of South Gate, South Los Angeles, and Santa Ana. The age and sex demographic of the participants consisted of 3 male college students, 1 female college student, and 1 male in his mid-40s. Only 1 of the participants was currently undocumented, and the rest of the participants lived in a household with at least 1 undocumented parent.

3.3. Recruitment

The participants were located through snowball sampling, in which people were asked if they knew of someone who fits the description of my research, and who would be willing to participate. Once they agreed to participate, we scheduled a time and date for an interview. The interviews were conducted in-person in a public setting, at either a local park or a restaurant. The interviewer, myself, was bilingual in both English and Spanish to accommodate participants who used either language. During the interview, I practiced active listening and was equipped with pen and paper to jot down notes. I took into account ethical standards by reminding the participants that their participation was completely voluntary, and they can choose not to answer questions that made them uncomfortable. I also guaranteed that their identities would remain confidential.

3.4. Coding

Before beginning the coding process, I analyzed the transcripts of qualitative data to search for patterns among the responses. I then grouped the patterns into three categories which I call “themes”, and then go into detail in my analysis on their attached “sub-themes”.

4. Data Analysis and Findings

4.1. Mixed-Status Families: Definitions and Measurements of Success

The first sub-theme, shared among all of the mixed-status family members in my interviews, was that in these families, the undocumented parents measured their success in America through their children’s accomplishments in educational attainment. In an interview with Francisco, who is an undocumented father of three U.S. born children, he shared that at 22-years-old he made the decision to leave Mexico and migrate to the U.S. in hopes of starting a family. When asked why he didn’t want to create a family in Mexico, Francisco responded “Because there is no future for my children in Mexico. We would have surely been living in poverty and they wouldn’t even get the opportunity to have an education past high school. Here in America an education for my children was guaranteed. Because here education is a derecho [right] for all its people.” (Interview, Francisco, 2-25-2018). For this reason, Francisco reports making the decision to embark on the long, treacherous journey across the Arizona desert, in search of a better life for his children.

During the interview with Francisco, a sub-theme emerged which revealed how Mexican-Americans pride themselves and find meaning in their work. Upon Francisco’s arrival to the United States, he settled in the city of South Los Angeles and began to work a construction job that required difficult labor and was low-paying. Although he faced poverty and discrimination in the United States, he felt that it was an improvement from the life he left behind in Mexico, because of the opportunity that his children have of educational mobility and a better life (Interview, Francisco, 2-25-2018). Consistent with the literature, Francisco’s ethos placed on hard work is reflected through research on Mexican migrant farmworkers, who describe working in their agricultural jobs by using the phrase “Trabajando duro todos los dias” (Parra-Cardona et al. 2006 pg.366) which translates to “working hard every day” in the fields. Along with hard work ethic, findings from Mexican migrant farmworkers show that “An emphasis on family was described as they reported that the well-being of their children was their priority in life.” (Parra-Cardona et al. 2006 pg.371). This literature on the migrant farm worker, was almost identical to Francisco’s experience of working in construction, because both Francisco and the migrant farmworker dedicated their lives to working hard in their jobs, and then used the money they earned

to invest into their children's education. Francisco found pride in "Trabajando duro todos los dias", and his work ethic became a significant part of his self-identity. Francisco considered himself to be successful because he worked an honest job and lived a humble, yet comfortable life with his wife and children.

Continuing with the sub-theme of success measured through their children and through work, in my interview with Robert, the son of two undocumented parents from Mexico, he shared a similar experience to the families of Mexican American migrant farmworkers. When asked about his relationship with his parents growing up, Robert responded "I love my parents. They sacrificed so much for me and my sisters when they came here from Mexico, and I want to repay them later on, when I'm done with school. They are the main reason why I want to pursue a college education. I want to take care of them like they have cared for me all my life." (Interview, Robert, 2-13-2018). When asked to describe his parents' occupations, Robert responded: "My Dad works as a mechanic and my Mom has worked all kinds of jobs from house cleaner, factory worker, and even selling clothes and food on the side. They're both hard workers." (Interview, Robert, 2-13-2018). Based on the interview, it was evident that Robert's parents are the driving force that encourage him to succeed academically.

Robert points out that his parents' immigration to the United States was a "sacrificial" act because they left behind his grandparents and their home to come to an unfamiliar country where they would be subjected to harsh working conditions and virtually no support system. The undocumented status of Robert's parents adds another layer of hardship to their lives as his family experiences fear of the potential deportation of their parents. Despite this adversity, Robert's parents remain resilient, and are able to have a positive outlook for the future by witnessing their children succeed academically in the United States.

The third sub-theme that emerged throughout my interviews was that Mexican-American mixed-status families considered themselves successful simply by being together as a family and being productive and contributing members to society. In an interview, Leo, a community college student and son of two undocumented parents living in Santa Ana, expressed this sentiment and said that "The fact that we're here in this country is a blessing that we don't take for granted. I live every day being thankful that we're together and nothing else matters" (Long Interview, Leo, 3-2-2018). In the case of Leo and all the other participants, they expressed gratitude for physically being on American land and living a normal life. The source of happiness for these participants was predominantly from their families, and they disregarded mentioning material possessions. These findings are consistent with the literature from Dreby (2012), which claims that simply stepping on American land and starting a family is considered success to Mexican-American immigrants.

Unrelated to the literature, since Leo's parents were undocumented I brought up the question: Do you ever fear that your parents could potentially be deported to Mexico? To which Leo responded "Do I worry about my parents? Yea, sometimes I do. But we don't spend our lives living in fear. We don't let the fear of deportation stop us from living our normal lives. But it has just made us more aware of our surroundings and possible dangers." (Long Interview, Leo, 3-2-2018). Unfortunately, due to U.S. immigration policies Leo's parents face the threat of potential deportation. Leo goes on to say that "What sucks the most is that it's pretty much impossible for my parents, on their own, to get a pathway to legal citizenship" (Long Interview, Leo, 3-2-2018). Throughout our interview, Leo made it clear that his parents' undocumented status did create limitations, but it did not disable them from living happily and fearlessly. This experience was relatable to all of the participants because they did not let the undocumented status define their identities.

4.2. Mixed-Status Families: Reliance on Supportive Social Networks

Another sub-theme that is prevalent in my research of mixed-status families is a continued connection with a large familial social network from Mexico. A Social network consists of "Connections [such as] communication, mutual recognition, and shared participation in some activity, flows of goods or services, and other forms of consequential interaction" (Tilly 2007 pg.7). Unfortunately, immigration policies in the United States prevent undocumented Mexican immigrants from freely traveling back to Mexico, and for this reason, undocumented immigrants make the difficult decision to physically leave their home and extended family behind, not knowing if they will ever see them again.

This same experience came up in an interview with Jennifer, the daughter of two undocumented parents, as she had a heart-broken facial expression, and said that "It hurts me so much that my parents haven't seen my grandparents in over 20 years. That's longer than my age. I can't imagine not being able to see my parents for that long" (Short Interview, Jennifer, 2-25-2018). Despite the distance between them, Jennifer mentions that her parents are in constant communication with their family back home and they are hopeful that they will one day be reunited. Francisco shared the similar narrative, as he had not seen his family in Mexico in almost 25 years, and was also hopeful that he could one

day return to his home of Jalisco, Mexico. When asked if he received any support from his parents back in Mexico, Francisco responded “Yes I can feel the love from my parents all the way over here.” (Interview, Francisco, 2-25-2018).

In an interview discussing his family in Mexico, Robert explains that “Even though I haven’t had the chance to visit them, I talk to them over the phone and when I tell them about my life here they tell me they’re so proud of me. My parents talk to our family back in Mexico almost daily. And now that there’s Facebook they’re able to message back and forth, and even do video calls sometimes.” (Interview, Robert, 2-13-2018). Robert goes on to say that “My parents always remind me that I have a big, loving family back in Mexico. I have grandparents, uncles, aunts, so many cousins, there are physicians and lawyers in our family. Family is important to us.” (Interview, Robert, 2-13-2018). In the case of Robert, he has a large network of family members in Mexico that can provide emotional support. Similarly, Robert’s parents act as a support system to his grandparents as they send money in the form of cash transfers whenever possible. The money that Robert’s parents send to his grandparents are known as remittances, and it is a common practice when “Immigrants earn higher wages in the United States and send a portion of these wages to family remaining in their home countries.” (Held 2017 pg.75). These findings show a reciprocal relationship, in which family in their home country provide emotional support, while the immigrant family provide financial help in the form of remittances.

A second sub-theme that emerged from my interviews was that immigrant parents received support from their children. Most research on children’s contribution to the immigrant household focused on language brokering, which Weisskirch (2013) describes as when “Immigrant parents enlist their children to serve as ‘language brokers’, where they translate and interpret face-to-face communication, written text, and a variety of documents” (Weisskirch 2013, pg.1147). Consistent with the literature, all the children of immigrants in my study said that they helped their parents with the English language throughout their entire life. In a short, informal interview with Gus, he shared some of his funny language brokering experiences, in which he tried to teach his Mom how to pronounce English words. Gus said “My Mom is always asking me how to pronounce English words, so I show her how, but she always has a funny way of speaking English. It’s a funny accent and it makes me laugh every time” (Short Interview, Gus, 2-13-2018).

Some of the participants were more involved in their role as mediators to their parents. For instance, Robert was involved in making business decisions for his parents when English was required to be spoken. When discussing language brokering, Robert states that “Yea I help my parents out. Since my parents are in the business of flipping cars and selling car parts. Sometimes they put me over the phone with a buyer that can only speak English and I do my best to translate what my parents are saying to the buyer.” (Interview, Robert, 2-13-2018). In a follow-up question, I asked if the responsibility to help his parents was overwhelming and Robert replied “Not at all. It’s the least I can do for my parents since they do so much for me. But there have been times where I do get a little frustrated in the moment if I was busy or was having trouble translating correctly” (Interview, Robert, 2-13-2018). Once again, these findings show another reciprocal relationship in Mexican-American mixed-status families, in which children contribute their English and American culture skills, while parents provide support through other means.

The third sub-theme that emerged was that Mexican-Americans received support from the companionship of close friends or fictive kin. Kemper (1982) uses the word “compadrazgo” throughout his research, to describe “The term fictive kinship to refer to the compadrazgo, although [he] also considers it to be a system of ritualized personal relations” (Kemper 1982, pg. 28). Most of the Mexican immigrants who leave Mexico and come to the U.S. have very little or no family at all who live in the receiving country. For this reason, Mexican immigrants form strong friendships with the people they meet in the U.S. and they call this relationship “compadres”. In an interview with Francisco, he relates to this relationship and said that “I have a friend that I met back when I was new to the U.S. and we became like family. Ever since we’ve helped each other out and been there for each other. He’s like another brother to me” (Interview, Francisco, 2-25-2018). The interview continued, and I asked if his wife has a similar female version of a “compadre” and Francisco laughed and replied “My wife does have a few close friends and they love each other very much. My wife also came here at a young age and she developed, [Francisco paused] kind of like a mother-daughter relationship with a woman named Maria. She helped my wife when she was struggling as if she were her own daughter” (Interview, Francisco, 2-25-2018). Through Francisco’s narrative, it is evident that close friendship bonds are created amongst Mexican-American immigrants.

4.3. Mixed-Status Families: Role of the Ethnic Enclave

A recurring pattern among the respondents was that these undocumented parents all decided to settle in Mexican immigrant enclaves, in cities such as South Los Angeles, South Gate, and Santa Ana. These ethnic enclaves facilitate the integration process of new immigrants through “Village based networks and customs (such as festivals), membership in ethnic associations and shared cultural and ethnic origins. These personal networks [within enclaves] provide food, shelter, job information and contacts, information on health care and social services, recreation and emotional

[support].” (Boyd 1989 pg.651). Within these ethnic communities, there are institutions dedicated to bringing the Latino residents together. An institution that plays a major role in Latino congregation is the ethnic church, which “allows immigrants to become more involved in civic activities at the micro level, particularly through volunteering opportunities sponsored by religious organizations.” (Ecklund 2013 pg.376). These religious institutions “serve a largely immigrant constituency [and] provide the formal and informal social services that facilitate the material, social and psychological adjustment of their members to American society”. (Ecklund 2013 pg.376)

One of the participants, Leo, was heavily involved in the catholic church as a child and growing up. In an interview, Leo said that “I spent a lot of the time at the church, and I liked it for the most part. It became my routine to go to get up early, dress nice to go to misa [mass] on Sunday, and after that we would go eat as a family” (Long Interview, Leo, 3-2-2018). In the case of Leo, the church was a major socializing agent in his upbringing. Much of his identity is tied to the teachings from the catholic church. In contrast to Leo, all the other participants were not as heavily involved in consistently attending church, however, they all practiced prayer and believed in either Catholicism or Protestant Christianity.

Another sub-theme and benefit from living in an ethnic enclave is having a community of Latino peers. Sanders et al. (1987) comments on the ethnic enclave economy as developing when “Most immigrant groups initially resettle in ethnically concentrated communities and generate a few small businesses to serve immediate, specialized consumption needs.” (pg.769). The benefits of living in an ethnic enclave are expressed by Robert and his family who lived in a community of Latinos in South Los Angeles. When asked what role his community played in his upbringing, Robert responded “I just felt like I belonged. Since growing up I was surrounded by people that shared the same ethnicity as me, and that spoke Spanish, and celebrated Latino culture like my family did.” (Interview, Robert, 2-13-2018). Although Robert showed gratitude for his membership in an ethnic enclave, he also expressed discontent and admitted that “Sometimes it felt like I was trapped in a bubble. And I wanted to explore new places that were different from my city” (Interview, Robert, 2-13-2018). Despite their sense of comfort living in the immigrant enclaves, this respondent reported that his family does not plan to live in an enclave for the rest of their lives. Robert and his parents view living in an enclave as only temporary, and they hope to one day become financially stable and buy a home in a better neighborhood. Robert and his parents’ over attitude about the ethnic enclave deviates from the literature since they perceive the enclave as a limitation to their life’s potential.

5. Discussion

The main findings from interviewing Mexican-American mixed-status family members were that even though they face unique challenges, due to having undocumented fathers and mothers, it has enabled them to develop resilience and hope for the future. This positive outlook on life is evident in all 3 of the themes that emerged from the data. For instance, the findings in the theme of “Definitions and Measurements of Success” are reliant on the immigrant’s view of success that considers the limitations that exist because of their undocumented status. In addition to a collective fearlessness, the mixed-status family members in my interviews reported a pattern of relying heavily on a supportive social network of family, friends, and peers. This finding is evident in both the themes “Reliance on Supportive Social Networks”, and the “Role of the Ethnic Enclave”. These families all settled in an ethnic enclave create a sense of belonging by sharing the Spanish language and being surrounded by Mexican-American peers and their businesses and institutions. Once living in the enclave, these families formed close companionship or fictive kin, which they call “compadres”. All the respondents maintained a close relationship with their families left back home by constantly communicating and sending remittances. Lastly, the relationship between undocumented parents and U.S. born children was reciprocal because these parents relied heavily on their children to help them with the English language and American culture.

The findings from this research are valid, however there are strengths and limitations that must be considered. The strength of this qualitative research was that the use of interviews allowed me to capture the lives and experiences of Mexican-American mixed-status families with descriptive detail. Another strength to this research was that I was not restricted to a set of questions during the interview. I was able to ask follow-up questions and continue talking to the participants for an extended amount of time. Some limitations to consider was that the data was collected from only 5 mixed-status family members in the form of interviews, the findings cannot be generalized to a larger population. In addition, the data was collected by individuals living in Southern California, which is a more liberal state and heavily populated with undocumented immigrants. For this reason, the participants in my study may have a very different experience from their counterparts in a different part of the country.

Future research on Mexican-American mixed-status families should examine the lives and experiences of families living in different parts of the country, to compare and contrast their findings to my own. In addition, there is a need for

quantitative research in which statistics can be gathered that describe the mixed-status immigrant family population as a whole. Lastly, it is imperative to continue research on undocumented immigrant families that include all ethnic minorities beyond just Mexican-Americans. Hopefully, through this research, readers will gain a newfound understanding and empathy for Mexican-American mixed-status families.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the results of this research revealed unique shared experiences among Mexican-American mixed-status families. Three categories of experiences emerged. Firstly, perceived success among family members interviewed placed importance on the child's educational attainment, hard work, and financial stability among the family. In addition, coping mechanisms among these families were found in the strong social ties with their family back in Mexico and with friendships made in the United States, as well as the reciprocal nature of the documented children helping their parents navigate American institutions. Lastly, family members expressed feeling a sense of comfort and belonging when living in ethnic enclaves.

Compliance with ethical standards

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

As the author of this research paper, I believe it is important to disclose my potential biases related to this study. As a researcher with Mexican-American heritage myself, I approached this topic with a personal interest and commitment to understanding the experiences of Mexican American families. My own experiences have undoubtedly influenced my perspective and approach to this research, driving me to explore the nuanced dynamics of identity, family, and community within Mexican-American mixed-status families. While I aimed to maintain objectivity and rigor throughout this study, I acknowledge that my personal background may have influenced the framing of the research questions, the interpretation of the data, and the conclusions drawn from the findings. To mitigate this bias, I consulted with colleagues and reflected on my own assumptions and perspectives.

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