

Making Up For Lost Time: The Experience of Separation and Reunification Among Immigrant Families

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In the United States today, one-fifth of the nation's children are growing up in immigrant homes. In the process of migration, families undergo profound transformations that are often complicated by extended periods of separation between loved ones – not only from extended family members, but also from the nuclear family. Though many families are involved in these transnational formulations, there has heretofore been little sense of the prevalence of these forms of family separations, nor of the effects on family relations. Further, such research has generally been conducted with clinical populations using Western theoretical frameworks and perspectives of families, limiting its applicability to immigrant families. The data presented in this article are derived from a bicoastal,

interdisciplinary study of 385 early adolescents originating from China, Central America, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Mexico. Findings from this study indicate that fully 85% of the participants had been separated from one or both parents for extended periods. While family separations are common to all country-of-origin groups, there are clear differences between groups in lengths of separations as well as people from whom the youth are separated. Descriptive statistics of country-of-origin prevalence, patterns, and outcomes are presented. Results of analyses of variance indicate that children who were separated from their parents were more likely to report depressive symptoms than children who had not been separated. Further, qualitative data from youth, parent, and teacher perspectives of the experience of separation and reunification provide evidence that the circumstances and contexts of the separations lead to a variety of outcomes. We conclude with a discussion of attenuating and complicating factors family therapists should consider in the assessment and treatment of immigrant families.

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Globalization is transforming the shape of the family (Glick-Schiller, 1992). With over one hundred and thirty million immigrants and refugees worldwide, the proportion of families involved in migrations

is considerable. In the United States today, one-fifth of our nation's children are growing up in immigrant homes. In the process of migration, families undergo profound transformations that are often complicated by extended periods of separation between loved ones—not only from extended family members, but also from the nuclear family.

Families who migrate often do so in a "stepwise" fashion (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992). Historically, the pattern was of the father going ahead, establishing himself while sending remittances home, and then sending for the wife and children as soon as it was financially possible. Today, the first world's demand for service workers draws mothers from a variety of developing countries often to care for "other people's children" (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992). In cases where mothers initiate migrations, they leave the children in the care of extended family such as grandparents or aunts along with the father if he is still part of the family. In many other cases, both parents go ahead, leaving the children in the care of extended family. When it is time for the children to arrive, they may be brought to the new land all together or in other instances, the children are brought in one at a time. Often the reunification of the entire family can take many years, especially when complicated by financial hurdles as well as immigration laws (Arnold, 1991; Simpao, 1999). These migration separations usually result in two sets of disruptions in attachments—first from the parent, and then from the caretaker to whom the child has become attached during the parent/child separation.

Immigrant Family Separations Research

Very little has been written about family separations arising out of the immigrant experience. Several clinical reports of Caribbean families in Canada and Great Britain note substantial negative family ramifications upon reunification (Bagley, 1972; Burke, 1980; Gordon, 1964; Sewell-

Coker, Hamilton-Collins, & Fein, 1985). Some of the literature points to negative sequelae for children both in the phase when the child is left with relatives as well as once reunification occurs. While apart from the parent, children may feel abandoned and may respond by detaching from the parent that left her (Glasgow & Ghouse-Shees, 1995). Once reunified, children often miss those who have cared for them in their parent's absence as well as extended family members and friends (Arnold, 1991; Sciarra, 1999). Particularly when separations have been protracted, children and parents frequently report they feel like strangers (Forman, 1993).

Complications in family relations are also reported as a frequent outcome. Over the course of time, the family may have evolved in such a way that excludes the parent that has been away making rejoining the family system difficult (Partida, 1996). Parents tend to expect their children to be grateful for their sacrifices but instead often find that their children are ambivalent about joining their parents in the migratory process (Arnold, 1991; Boti & Bautista, 1999; Chestam, 1972; Sciarra, 1999). Parents often report difficulties in reasserting control over their children (Arnold, 1991; Boti & Bautista, 1999; Sewell-Coker et al., 1985). Reestablishing this authority may be complicated by parental guilt, which may result in inconsistencies and overindulgence (Arnold, 1991; Burke, 1980). A "continual pattern of rejection and counter-rejection" may emerge leading families to seek treatment (Glasgow & Ghouse-Shees, 1995).

Some have argued that the widespread cultural practice of "child fostering" or "child shifting" may normalize the process of the separation. Throughout the Caribbean either because of family hardship or in order to provide the child with a better educational opportunity, children are often sent to live with extended family members

(Bagley, 1972; Burke, 1980; Gordon, 1964; Sewell-Coker et al., 1985; Soto, 1987; Waters, 1999). This widely accepted cultural practice occurs during the course of migrations abroad as well as within the native land and is not viewed as deviant. In communities where child fostering is widely practiced, no stigma is attached to its occurrence (Burke, 1980; Sewell-Coker et al., 1985; Soto, 1987; Waters, 1999). Some have gone so far as to argue that child fostering can be an enriching experience and can help to provide all those involved with a wider network of supportive social relations than would be available prior to the event (Soto, 1987).

At the individual level, attachment difficulties have been noted (Wilkes, 1992) because children often withdraw from the parents with whom they are reunited (Burke, 1980). Depressive responses have also been reported in children (Rutter, 1971) as well as mothers (Hohn, 1996). Clinical reports indicate that some youth may respond by acting out in a variety of ways (Burke, 1980; Wilkes, 1992). It should be noted, however, that the clinical literature reporting on immigrant family separations and reunifications might not accurately represent the responses in families that do seek treatment. This clinical literature is likely to overestimate the pathological responses to separations, because only families experiencing difficulties are likely to present themselves for treatment.

For example, two dissertation studies not drawn from clinical populations found no clear link between separations and outcomes. A study of stress responses among Jamaican immigrant families found that while many mothers were depressed, the children who were separated from their mothers did not demonstrate higher levels of stress responses than children who had not been separated (Hohn, 1996). Likewise, in a study of college-age students that compared immigrants who had been separated from their parents during early development to

immigrants who had not been separated, no relation was found between the separation and either object relations or motivation for intimacy (Simpao, 1999). While these studies may be limited by their use of standardized instruments, which had not been normed on the populations under consideration, they raise the possibility that the link between separations and negative outcomes may not be direct.

Theoretical Frameworks

Several bodies of literature provide a potential framework for understanding aspects of the processes involved in family separations. Object relations theorists would predict that ruptures in parental relationships would lead to significant developmental challenges. Winnicott argued that children develop into secure adults within the context of stable parental relationships (Winnicott, 1958). Object relations theorists generally maintain that early relationships are the foundation of the sense of self and the capacity for relationship with others (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983). Though many object relations theorists place much emphasis on infancy and pre-school attachments, others have argued that the capacity to develop object relations is not firmly established in pre-school years but continues to develop into adolescence (Western, 1989). Any disruptions in primary object relations are thought to create significant pathologies.

This theoretical framework may have limited applicability to immigrant families, however. Object relations theory places emphasis on the mother-child dyad privileging a Western understanding of the nuclear family. Many immigrant families come from cultures that include a wide supportive net of extended family members. In extended families, the "emotional eggs" may be more widely dispersed among several "emotional baskets." When there are multiple significant relationships, others besides parents can effectively attend to

the emotional needs of developing children. Hence, when a parent leaves, while he or she may be missed, the temporary loss may not be traumatic.

Attachment theorists also maintain that disruptions in "affectional bonds" with parental figures have profound psychological and developmental implications (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1973; Lyons-Ruth, 1996).

An attachment figure is never wholly interchangeable or replaceable by another, even though there may be others to whom one is also attached. In attachments...there is a need to maintain proximity, distress upon inexplicable separation, pleasure or joy upon reunion, and grief at loss (Ainsworth, 1989, p. 709).

Early attachment theorists would generally predict that the attachment with the mother or primary caretaker is of particular significance. Again, this Western model may be overemphasizing the pathogenic potential of ruptures in the parent-child dyad. Ainsworth has recognized that parent surrogates, siblings, and peers also may be extremely significant as attachment figures (Ainsworth, 1989). Hence, disruptions in these extended family relationships can also lead to feelings of sadness and loss.

The literature on the experience of loss provides another frame for broadening our understanding of the possible consequences of ruptures in family relationships (Boss, 1999; Doka, 1989; Feshbach & Feshbach, 2001; Hepworth, Ryder, & Dreyer, 1981; Neimeyer, 2001; Payne, Horn, & Relf, 1999; Shapiro, 1994). Loss—which can result from death as well as a variety of other "exits"—is a transition that requires adaptation and may trigger a variety of physical, emotional, and behavioral responses. Some argue that it is the loss of the individual (or individuals) that triggers such responses, while others claim that it is the secondary losses (loss of routines, emotional or financial security,

and so forth) that accompany the initial loss that ultimately cause negative sequelae (Goldstein, Wampler, & Wise, 1997; Payne et al., 1999). In immigrant family separations, these secondary losses are likely to play a significant role in adaptation.

The response to what Boss (1999) has termed "ambiguous loss" is particularly relevant to parent-child separations during the migratory process. Ambiguous losses—when a loved one is either physically present but psychologically unavailable, or when they are physically absent but psychologically present—may lead to complications in the resolution of grief. Since the parent are not dead but simply gone for what is often expected to be a short time, "permission" to grieve may not be granted. The child's loss may thus go unrecognized and lead to disenfranchised grief, whereby silence surrounds the loss (Doka, 1989). Under such circumstances, the expected emotions of grieving—sadness, guilt, anger, and hopelessness—may be prolonged because there is no public arena in which to express these emotions. In immigrant family separations, because there is no clear-cut finality in the relationship, responses may take the form of low-grade chronic symptomatology rather than intense, acute responses.

A broader systemic theoretical framework helps us to predict how losses and separations might affect families and children. It is critical to understand the way in which the adults in the child's circle as well as the wider culture react to the loss (Shapiro, 1994; Silverman, 2000). Grief triggers a crisis in family development that affects all members as they attempt to accommodate to the absence of a "vital member of an interdependent family" (Shapiro, 1994). Both the subjective individual experience, as well as the "systemic interweaving of grief reactions in the family, community, and culture," are influential in family and individual development (Shapiro, 1994).

If the remaining caretaker is overcome with his or her own losses, he or she may not be available to help the child contain its emotions. Critical to wellbeing is the child's ability to keep the missing parent or caretaker psychologically present (Silverman, 2000). This process may be best served when children are able to identify with a part of the loved one, thus maintaining an ongoing relationship even in her absence. If the child has continuity of care and someone who provides connection, research suggests that the child will be able to make meaning of the loss and accommodate to it in the Piagetian sense of the word (Silverman, 2000).

Recent scholarship in the field of loss and trauma suggests that people are involved in a process of meaning reconstruction after facing disruptive life events in which they lose the connection with someone they love (Neimeyer, 2001; Payne et al., 1999). Meaning-making and meaning-finding approaches to loss do not de-emphasize the suffering that accompanies such events. Rather, they place the losses in a more complex web that also includes possibilities of finding value and new meaning with what remains after the loss. They also situate loss in a social and relational context, rather than viewing it as a private experience. As such, they emphasize the cross-cultural differences not only of the practices of grieving, but also in the meanings and meaning reconstruction of loss (Neimeyer).

Attachment and object relations theory along with the clinical literature on parent-child separations and loss would generally predict that separations resulting from immigration as well as, concomitant reunifications are likely to be quite problematic. There is, however, no clear empirical indication of what proportion of migratory journeys involve separations, and whether or not complications are as widespread as the literature would predict.

Prevalence

Though many families seem to be involved in these transnational formulations, there is little sense of the prevalence of these forms of family separations, nor of the effects on family relations (Falicov, 2002). There are also no available data providing evidence of cross-cultural patterns of immigrant family separations. What we know tends to be anecdotal and largely derived from clinical reports (Falicov, 1998; Glasgow & Gouse-Shees, 1995; Prince, 1968; Sciarra, 1999). While these reports are important in delineating the syndrome and its clinical ramifications, they do not shed light on the prevalence of family separations caused by migrations. These studies, because they are derived from clinical populations, only focus on families and youth that are in treatment. Thus, such findings may overly pathologize the outcome of separations. In this article, using data from a nonclinical population, we will report on the prevalence and nature of these separations. Using quantitative and qualitative data we will discuss how children experience immigrant separations. We will also reflect on the effect of separations, the possible negative consequences as well as the families' resilience, and delineate factors that may complicate or attenuate the separation.

METHOD

Data presented here are derived from part of the Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation Study (LISA) conducted at Harvard University. This interdisciplinary and comparative study was designed to document the adaptations of recently arrived immigrant youth coming from a variety of sending countries. We will report and discuss the findings that emerged from parent and child interviews designed to elicit background information about the participants, as well as findings from a follow-up child interview in which we asked a series of questions about the separation and reunification.

Cross-cultural research with immigrant youth is inherently challenging. There is a growing consensus in the field that mixed-method designs, linking emic and etic perspectives, triangulating data, and embedding emerging findings into an ecological framework are essential to this kind of endeavor (Branch, 1999; Bronfenbrenner, 1988; Doucette-Gates, Brooks-Gunn, & Chase-Lansdale, 1998; Hughes, Seidman, & Edwards, 1993; Sue & Sue, 1987; Szapocnik & Krutines, 1993). An important theme of the methodological debates surrounding the philosophical assumptions of qualitative and quantitative methods is whether they are compatible given radically different epistemological grounds (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). While these debates continue, there is a growing body of work proposing that research that builds upon the strengths of both types of approaches is necessary to achieve an understanding of complex phenomena (Ponterotto & Greiger, 1999; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998; Tolman & Szalacha, 1999).

The LISA study uses research anthropology strategies to gain perspective on immigrant cultural models and social practices relevant to adaptation in the new setting. Youth are observed and interviewed in their schools, their communities, and their homes. Research psychology strategies are carefully deployed in order to establish a data baseline on immigration histories, social and family relations, and academic attitudes and behaviors. An interdisciplinary, multicultural team of bilingual and bicultural researchers enables us to gain entry into immigrant communities, establish rapport and trust with our participants, develop culturally sensitive instruments, and provide an interpretive community for data interpretation and the contextualization of findings.

Participants

The 385 youth participants are recent immigrants from Central America, China, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Mexico.

The youth, whom we are following longitudinally, were between the ages of 9 and 14 at the beginning of the study. The participants, stratified by gender and country of origin, were recruited from 51 schools in 7 school districts in the Boston and San Francisco greater metropolitan areas.

We negotiated entrance into specific school sites with high densities of immigrant students. With the help of school authorities, youth who potentially met the inclusion criteria were identified—recently arrived immigrants whose parents were both from the country of origin. Research assistants requested potential participants' involvement, assured them of confidentiality, and obtained parental informed consent. This is a sample of convenience. Random sampling would have been ideal, but it is not possible with a study that requires specific inclusion criteria coupled with signed permission from school personnel and parents, as well as a commitment to 5 years of participation. This limits to some degree our ability to generalize from our sample. In comparing the results of our descriptive statistics (parental education, parental employment, household size, etc.) to census and other available information on the U.S. immigrant population, we are confident that this sample is representative of a nonclinical population of recently arrived immigrants currently entering public school systems.

Procedures

Student- and parent-structured interviews were developed to gather data systematically on a variety of relevant topics including: migration and demographic history, schooling in the country of origin, initial impressions of U.S. society in general and U.S. schools in particular, aspirations, attitudes toward schooling, patterns of cognitive and behavioral academic engagement, kinship, family life, and networks of social relations. The student interviews employ a variety of question formats—some open-ended, others forced-choice, and still

others narrative. The interviews are translated into Spanish, Haitian Kreyol, Mandarin, and Cantonese. Participants can choose the language in which they wish to be interviewed. Interviews conducted with all informants are piloted to establish age, cultural, and linguistic appropriateness, then taped, translated into English, and coded.

Pattern of Separation Analyses

A major function of the structured interviews was to collect the data for the quantitative analyses. A coding system was devised for the questions appearing on the student- and parent-structured interview. The initial coding system was devised using a priori categories. As we began to review these data, additional categories emerging from the data were added. The coding system was reworked until we were able to establish a high overall interrater reliability (.90 Cohen's kappa). Once the data were coded, descriptive statistics were calculated to determine group differences in patterns and lengths of separations.

Psychological Outcome Data

As part of the psychosocial measures included in our study, our cross-cultural research team developed a psychological symptom scale, informed by the DSM-IV (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) and the SCL-90 questionnaire (Derogatis, 1977) that included questions determined by our interdisciplinary research team to be developmentally appropriate and cross-culturally relevant. The questions were piloted on informants at the same developmental level as our participants, representing each of the country-of-origin groups under consideration. This 26-item scale consisted of 5 subscales: depression, anxiety, cognitive functioning, interpersonal sensitivity, and hostility.¹

Qualitative Data

The qualitative analysis was conducted with data gathered from several sources.

These included open-ended questions from the structured interviews conducted with the whole sample of the 385 children participating in the LISA study and separately with their parents. We have also developed in-depth case studies with 80 children in the LISA study, which include detailed longitudinal ethnographic observations in which the experience of separation was one of the important dimensions. In addition, twelve semi-structured, in-depth interviews focused specifically on the experience of separation were conducted with youth who had undergone lengthy separations. The data were organized and analyzed using two software programs – FolioViews and ATLAS.ti. These programs facilitated the inductive and deductive development and application of codes across data sources, as well as the creation of conceptual models from our results.

RESULTS

Prevalence and Patterns of Separations

Strikingly, fully 85% of the youth in our sample were separated from one or both parents² during the process of migration (Table 1).³ There are significant differences between the ethnic groups participating in the LISA study. Families from the Chinese group, most frequently, tend to migrate as a unit, while the circumstances of migration for the Haitian and Central American groups impose a family disruption during migration in nearly all cases (96% for both groups).

From whom were these children separated? As we can see in Table 1, nearly half of our sample were separated from both parents. Note that this includes separation as a direct result of immigration, as well as separation for multiple factors, including immigration combined with divorce, or the death of a parent, and so forth. Again, there are significant group differences. Separation from both parents was most likely to occur among the Central American families (in 80% of the cases). This incidence

Table 1.
From Whom Was Child Separated?

<i>N</i> = 385	Chinese	Dominican	Central American	Haitian	Mexican	Total Sample
	<i>n</i> = 78 %	<i>n</i> = 75 %	<i>n</i> = 77 %	<i>n</i> = 71 %	<i>n</i> = 84 %	%
Family comes all together	37	41	4	4	15	15
Family separated during immigration	63	89	96	96	85	85
Mother only	15	3	0	10	2	6
Father only	40	25	16	27	42	30
Both parents	8	61	80	59	40	49

is also high among Dominican and Haitian families. When the child is separated from only one parent, it is most likely to be from the father, occurring in 30% of our cases. This was the typical pattern for Chinese and Mexican children. Separation from only the mother occurs much less frequently within the whole sample.

Immigrant children today, just as they were historically, are most likely to be separated from their fathers—79% of our sample were separated from fathers at some point in the migratory process (Table 2). This occurred in 96% of the Central American families, and in over 80% of the Dominican, Haitian, and Mexican families. It was least likely to occur among the Chinese, but still occurred in nearly half the cases. It is important to note that even though separation only from the mother (without separation from the father) is relatively uncommon, the total incidence of children separated from their mother during the course of the immigration is very high. Fifty-five percent of the children are separated from their mothers sometime during the course of migration. There are dramatic differences here between groups. The Chinese children are least likely to be separated from their mothers, while the majority of Central American, Dominican, and Haitian children lived apart from their

mothers for a time. Nearly half the Mexican children are separated from their mothers at some time during the migration.

Additionally, it is important to note that 28% of the children have been separated from their siblings as a direct result of migration. The stepwise pattern of bringing the children to the U.S. is more common among the Dominican and Central American groups, occurring in approximately one-third of the families. Finally, we must not forget that in most cases in which the child has been left in the country of origin, whether with one parent or alone, a significant bond of attachment is likely to have been formed with another primary caregiver, such as an aunt, uncle, grandparent, etc. The impact of the separation is quite apparent in the qualitative data we will present below.

Length of Separations

Families often expect that the process of establishing a home in the host country will not take long, and that the family will be reunited within a short period of time. This may not occur for a variety of reasons, including financial obstacles, difficulties with legalizing immigration status, as well as for personal reasons, such as divorce and separation of parents, propelled by the tensions of the migration process. Thus,

Table 2.
From Whom Was Child Separated—Mother or Father?

	Chinese <i>n</i> = 78 %	Dominican <i>n</i> = 75 %	Central American <i>n</i> = 77 %	Haitian <i>n</i> = 71 %	Mexican <i>n</i> = 84 %	Total Sample %
Mother at some time during the migration	23	61	80	69	42	55
Father at some time during the migration	48	86	96	86	82	79

the length of separation from parents can turn out to be unexpectedly long, with individual cases in our sample reporting being separated from one or both parents for nearly their entire childhood.

The difference between the groups in length of time for which the children have been separated from their mothers is striking (Table 3). The majority of the Mexican youth were separated from their mothers for less than 2 years. Chinese children rarely separate from their mothers to begin with, but when they do, it is usually from 2 to 4 years. For the Central American children, on the other hand, the separation is protracted, lasting over 5 years in 49% of the cases.

When separation from the father occurs during migration, it is often a very lengthy or permanent one (Table 4). For those families who were separated, 51% had

separations from fathers that lasted over 5 years. This was the case for over half of the Dominican and Central American families and in nearly three-quarters of the Haitian families.

Sequelae

We conducted one-way analyses of variance, ANOVA, using the different family separation and family constellation patterns as predictors and the psychological symptom scales as outcomes. Analyses of family constellations revealed that children currently living in intact families noted significantly fewer depressive symptoms than those in the other types of family arrangements: $F(1, 392) = 7.72, p < 0.01$. There were no differences in the other psychological subscales for the various family constellations.

We also conducted analyses of variance

Table 3.
Length of Child Separation From Mother Due to Migration

	Chinese <i>n</i> = 17 %	Dominican <i>n</i> = 44 %	Central American <i>n</i> = 51 %	Haitian <i>n</i> = 32 %	Mexican <i>n</i> = 26 %	Total Sample <i>N</i> = 170 %
Up to 2 years	41	36	20	13	77	34
2-4 years	53	39	31	53	23	38
5+ years	6	25	49	34	0	28

Table 1.
Length of Child Separation From Father Due to Migration

	Chinese <i>n</i> = 35 %	Dominican <i>n</i> = 11 %	Central American <i>n</i> = 51 %	Haitian <i>n</i> = 11 %	Mexican <i>n</i> = 52 %	Total Sample <i>N</i> = 223 %
Up to 2 years	51	11	12	20	35	25
2-4 years	11	30	31	10	33	24
5+ years	37	57	57	71	33	51

to determine if psychological symptoms differed across different family separation patterns. Children who were separated from their parents were more likely to report depressive symptoms than children who were not separated from their parents during migration: $F(1, 388) = 4.54, p < 0.05$. Children who were separated from both parents had a higher level of reported symptoms compared to children who were not separated: $F(3, 372) = 2.84, p < 0.05$. Girls who were separated from their parents were particularly likely to report depressive symptoms: $F(1, 333) = 6.22, p < 0.05$. Again however, there were no significant differences between the separated and non-separated groups for either the composite psychological symptom scale or for the other psychological symptom subscales.

It should also be noted that the level of reported total psychological symptoms and specifically depressive symptoms for those children that have been separated from their parents during migration is significantly different between ethnic groups. The Chinese children report the fewest, while the Haitian children report the highest psychological symptoms as a whole: $F(4, 317) = 4.12, p < 0.01$, and depression in particular: $F(4, 330) = 6.13, p < 0.001$.

Qualitative Data

It was clear in our many interviews and conversations during the ethnographic process with immigrant youth, their

parents, and teachers, that these separations were experienced as painful and complex by many of those affected. Below we briefly present the perspectives of children, parent, and teacher.

Children often spoke emotionally about separating from their loved ones. The children are asked: What was the hardest thing about coming to the U.S.? In the first-year interview, frequently the response reflected the painful nature of leaving behind a loved one. As one 14-year-old Dominican girl said:

The day I left my mother I felt like my heart was staying behind. Because she was the only person I trusted—she was my life, I felt as if a light had extinguished. I still have not been able to get used to living without her.¹

For most children, the departure is a time of mixed feelings. There is an excitement about the prospect of reuniting with loved ones and a new life. On the other hand, migrating entails leaving behind caretakers, who may have functioned as attachment figures for the child, for many years. Many spoke emotionally of the bittersweet nature of leaving. As an 11-year-old Central American boy tells us:

Once I was in the plane they told me to be calm, not to be nervous, not to cry. I was crying because I

was leaving my grandfather. I had conflicting feelings. On the one side I wanted to see my mother, but on the other I did not want to leave my grandfather.

While reunification is usually described with relief and joy, it is often interlaced with contradictory emotions. Feelings of disorientation are prevalently expressed. At times, the children report not recognizing the parent and poignantly describe feeling like they are meeting a stranger. As a 13-year-old Haitian girl said:

"I didn't know who I was going to live with or how my life was going to be. I knew of my father but I did not know him."

In several cases, the children express fear of the parent who they have not seen in many years. When the family has evolved in the child's absence to include new parental figures and siblings, the reunification process is further complicated. A 10-year-old Chinese girl recalls:

The first time I saw my father, I thought he was my uncle... I was really afraid when I saw my father's face. He looked very strict. I was unhappy. My father was a stranger to me. I didn't expect to live with a stepmother.

Hence, reunification is often an ambivalent experience. The theme of forging a new relationship with a stranger is prevalent. This complicates the future development of the relationship, with the sense of distance and unfamiliarity persisting for different lengths of time.

Parents also spoke poignantly of the sadness of separating from their children. In many cases this happened when the children were infants and toddlers. Leaving the children can result from difficult economic conditions or dangerous circumstances in the country. As the mother of a 13-year-old Central American boy explained:

I was a single mother and there we were at war. I talked it over with my mother and she told me that maybe [things would be better] on "the other side." It was very hard above all to leave the children when they were so small. I would go into the bathroom of the gas station and milk my breasts that overflowed, crying for my babies. Every time I think of it, it makes me sad.

Parents and children maintain contact by phone, letters, and gifts though long-distance communication can be difficult, especially in long-term separations, as the children grow up and the parent becomes an abstraction. The mother of a 12-year-old Central American boy explained:

They lived with my mother in El Salvador (I left when they were babies). I spoke to the eldest once a month by phone. As the little one grew, I spoke to him, too. But since he didn't know me, our communication was quite short. I really had to pull the words out of him.

It is very important for the parent that the child understands the reasons they left so that they can appreciate the sacrifice. This, of course, is not always the case. As the father of a 13-year-old Mexican boy confided:

My son and my daughter are not warm toward me. They are still mad that I left them and was separated from them for years. Even when I explain to them that I came here for them, they don't hear, they don't understand. My daughter acted strangely when she first got here. She got jealous when I hugged my wife. She just wanted my attention for herself. Now, that's changed and things are getting back to normal.

When the caretaker in the country of origin supports the relationship in the

absence of the parent, easier reunification is reported. The mother of a 13-year-old Mexican girl told us:

In spite of everything, we have a good relationship because my mother always spoke well of me. She always told her where I was and that some day I would come for her. So there's a certain respect.

Other parents point to the difficulties faced upon reunification and the building of the new relationship. As can be expected, such experiences are mostly evident for families in which the children have been separated from parents at a very young age, and for lengthy periods of time. The mother of a 13-year-old Central American girl admitted:

Our relationship has not been that good. We were apart for eleven years and communicated by letters. We now have to deal with that separation. It's been difficult for her and for me. It's different for my son because I've been with him since he was born. If I scold him he understands where I'm coming from. He does not get angry or hurt because I discipline him, but if I discipline [my daughter] she takes a completely different attitude than he. I think this is a normal way to feel based on the circumstance.

Parents, like children, report that reunifications can be complicated for children that have to adapt to a new family constellation. Jealousy of new siblings or a new partner was frequently noted. These characteristics of the separation can lead to increased tension between the siblings and differential relationships of the parent toward the different children. The mother of a 13-year-old Central American boy disclosed: "We're getting used to each other. We are both beginning a different life together . . . [T]he kids are jealous of

each other and my husband is jealous of them."

Parents also acknowledge the difficulties that children suffer when separated from other relatives that remain in the country of origin. The mother of a 9-year-old Mexican girl summed up the situation: Before she came, she missed us. Now she misses her grandparents."

Teachers echo the parents' and children's perspectives. In interviews we conducted with teachers asking about their views of the challenges immigrant students face, several spontaneously offered observations about immigrant family separations. For example, a high school counselor informed us:

Did you know we have kids who are here whose parents are not here? They live with relatives or friends like neighbors, old neighbors of the parents, and they work to support the parents back home. So some of the kids are coming to school and working as well. [In other cases] the family has been separated for many years . . . so when they are reunited sometimes it's a mess in the literal sense of the word. The mother doesn't know the child; she left him and he grew up with grandmother . . . The mother wasn't there and when he comes here the mother doesn't have the time to really build the relationship or maybe doesn't have the skills. Because she knows she's been working, sending money, caring for the child and everything—she's been doing her part. But now it is the child's turn, you know, to show understanding, to show appreciation . . . Sometimes you have the mother come first and the kids stay back home and maybe father left home and has a new relationship, and the mother is in a new relationship. So that kids may be coming to a new family with other siblings and a step-parent.

A director of an International center at a high school shared the following:

I feel like I need to give [students] a great deal of personal and emotional support in the transition they are making. Talk with them, use our advising group to constantly talk about the problems of adjustment, adaptation, how are you feeling, what issues are coming up....Almost universally they say things like "I'm happy this year because I'm with my mother for the first time in 5 years but I miss my grandmother who still lives in El Salvador." Or "I don't see my dad anymore." You know, the whole issue of family separations. There are a lot of emotional issues which come into this....So, many students come here because one parent has brought them and all of a sudden they are confronted with a parent they don't know very well. Maybe they have a whole other family they don't know....We have people here from China, from Brazil, from Haiti, from Central America and what is interesting is that they all [talk about] the same issues, "I don't know how to live with my parent."

DISCUSSION

Clinical Implications

Here we have presented substantial evidence that separations between family members occur frequently during the journey of immigration. The vast majority of the immigrant children in our sample, arriving from five different countries of origin and recruited on two coasts, have been separated from one or both parents.⁶ Given that 20% of children in the United States are growing up in immigrant homes, a substantial number of children are clearly affected by this phenomenon. The fact that such a large number of families are affected by separation has clear implications for

clinicians treating immigrant families. In history taking, clinicians should always ask whether family separations occurred. The evaluation should include inquiries about patterns of migration, length of separation, and family members' involvement. In cases of family disruptions, the family should not be viewed as deviant, as separations are normative to the migratory process.

Using a Western frame of attachment and object relations theory along with a nuclear family framework would lead clinicians to predict that such separations would result in some degree of the psychological sequelae. Reports emerging from clinical contexts have corroborated a concern that family separations arising from the migratory experience lead to family friction and negative psychological outcomes (Arnold, 1991; Brosse, 1950; Burke, 1980; CDI, 1999). Our finding that children who arrived to the U.S. as a family unit involving no separations from their immediate family were less likely to report depressive symptoms than children whose families had separated during the migratory process partially substantiate this prediction.

Predictions based on the literature, however, would also lead us to expect that longer lengths of separation would be related to reporting greater psychological symptoms (Bowlby, 1973; CDI, 1999; Freud, Goldstein & Solnit, 1973). Our findings did not substantiate a relationship between length of separations and psychological symptoms. The fact that the total psychological symptom scale as well as the anxiety, cognitive functioning, interpersonal functioning, and hostility scales were not significantly different for separated and nonseparated children lead us to conclude that the predicted outcomes may be less acute than might have been anticipated. These findings are in keeping with research on children undergoing the severe stress of war, which has demonstrated that behavioral disturbances often appear to be

"less intense than anticipated" (Jensen & Shaw, 1993).

While our data does illustrate a relationship between separation and increased levels of reported depressive symptoms, the statistical analyses do not allow us to make interpretations of direct causality. Other contributing factors may play a role in the report of these symptoms. For example, the level of reported depressive symptoms for those children who have been separated from their parents during migration is significantly different between ethnic groups. The Chinese children

Our findings may also be partially attributed to the ambiguous nature of the loss. Rather than viewing the loss as permanent, ideally the child views the loss as temporary, allowing her to keep the loved one psychologically present. Further, the extended nature of the immigrant family constellations may help to dissipate the loss.

Although the reporting of symptoms is generally less than we might have anticipated, our qualitative data, nonetheless, illustrate the poignancy of the separations from children's, parents', and teachers' points of view. These findings are in keeping with research on children separated from their caretakers under circumstances other than migration, which confirms that even in cases in which children do not manifest measurable psychological symptoms, most report missing their parents and caretakers (Charney, 2000; Totterman, 1989). Separations from loved ones—extended family members as well as parents—seem to lead to at least transient feelings of loss and sadness in both adults and children.

Separations may also lead to temporary disruptions in family homeostasis when family members leave and are later reunited—it is to be expected that families would be temporarily destabilized. In most cases, the family will return to normal over time. In others, difficulties

of clinical proportions may continue long after reunification. Future studies should systematically assess patterns and responses to family separations and reunifications. With better understanding of response patterns, clinicians would be able to distinguish between normal and temporary responses, and more pathogenic individual-level and family-level responses requiring clinical intervention.

We would emphasize that symptoms are not necessarily long-term and will undoubtedly be affected by the social contexts both in country of origin, as well as in the receiving site. To understand immigrant children's responses to family separations, we must consider the complexity of the separation experience and the circumstances accompanying the separation. There is a wide range of variability in migratory patterns and circumstances. Further, it is quite likely that the psychological sequelae will not be manifested similarly across country of origin, groups or developmental levels (Minuchin, Colapinto, & Minuchin, 1998).

Complicating and Attenuating Factors

We postulate that a number of factors complicate the separation experience. Trauma arising from either a family tragedy, such as the death of a loved one, or from political, ethnic, religious prosecution, or warfare, will dramatically alter the magnitude of the response. The sequelae may be more negative if the parent who goes away is the primary caretaker rather than the parent with whom the attachment is weaker. Associated losses may compound responses. Coming to terms with a parent leaving is more difficult if a child loses other critical supportive relationships concurrently. When predictable routines, so cherished by most children, are dramatically altered at the same time the parent leaves, the experience will be more disruptive (Boothby, 1992). It may not be the separation alone but rather the accompanying "derailing events

before, during, or after dislocation that lead to psychological distress of clinical proportions" (Perez-Foster, 2001).

The concurrent demise of the marital relationship may occur in tandem with the migration (Boti & Bautista, 1999; Simpao, 1999). The anticipation of the immigration may cause relationships to rupture prior to immigration and, in other cases, a break in the marital relationship may precipitate a parent journey abroad in search of a stable income (Simpao, 1999). At times, following protracted separations, once the family reunites, the links in the marital dyad "may be so weakened that the relationship comes apart in the new context; women may become significantly more independent, affairs may have occurred, or the more recently arrived partner may find the adjustment difficult (Boti & Bautista, 1999). Hence, it is a challenge to sort through which are the problems that arise out of the immigration-related separation and those that develop because of the marital separation.

The quality of several relationships will play a significant role in the nature of adjustment including the child-parent(s) relationship bond prior to the migration (Arnold, 1991) as well as the rapport between the caretaker(s) and child. Of critical importance is the relationship between the care-taking triangle—caretaker, child, and parent (Minuchin et al., 1998). Problems may emerge if the parent feels threatened by the caretaker (Falicov, 2002) or if the caretaker is disparaging of the parent. When the parent and caretakers are able to work effectively as co-parents, disruptions are likely to be much less than when there is an ambivalent (or openly hostile) relationship. To illustrate:

Mei is a twin born to a middle-class urban Chinese family. She and her sister were largely raised by their paternal grandparents, who were openly hostile to their mother who is often away for her

work. The family migrated when the sisters were 10. While the mother quickly found a job as a researcher, her father found the adjustment difficult. He returned to China with Mei, leaving her twin with the mother in the U.S. After 2 years in China, they returned to the U.S. There was tremendous marital discord. The mother and Mei's sister are openly hostile and disparaging of the father as well as Mei whom they associate with him. Mei is withdrawn, depressed, and disengaged from school.

Joaquin is a 15-year-old raised in rural Nicaragua largely by his maternal grandparents. An extremely contentious relationship exists between the grandparents and Joaquin's father. They had only negative things to say about the father who went to the U.S. early in Joaquin's childhood, taking the mother with him. At one point, Joaquin's father "kidnapped" (Joaquin's words) him from the grandparents, which culminated in a violent scene involving the brandishment of a machete. Four years after joining his parents in the U.S. Joaquin names only his grandparents, as significant people in his life. He is clearly socially isolated and longs desperately to return to Nicaragua.

On the other hand, a cooperative caretaking triangle can enrich the child's experience. The following situation exemplifies this:

Regine lived for 5 years with her mother in Haiti's capital city until her single mother migrated to the U.S. in search of regular income to support her daughter. Recognizing that she could not work long hours and suitably care for her daughter, she left Regine with her sister with whom she had a close relationship. Regine's mother maintained regular contact throughout the year with both her daughter and the caretaking aunt and went back every year to visit them. Regine also visited her mother several times during summers. Once she joined her mother in the U.S. at age 10 to stay permanently. Regine stayed in regular con-

tact with her aunt who remains an important psychological presence in her life. Her adjustment was smooth and she reports feeling lucky that she has two mothers—she refers to her biological mother as “maman” and to her aunt as “petite maman.”

A caretaker's ambivalent relationship with the parent who has left may foreclose positive discussions about the missing parent (Shapiro, 1994). If the caretaker is concurrently grieving the absence of the missing parent, the child is likely to hold back in talking about the loss, making it difficult to make meaning of the situation. Further, if the caretaker is also depressed by the separation from the parent, she will be less available psychologically to the child (Clarke-Stewart, McCartney, & Vandell, et al., 2000; Falicov, 1998; Hohn, 1996; Lyons-Ruth, Wolfe, & Lyubchik, 2000; Shapiro, 1994; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001; Weissbourd, 1996).

A variety of family characteristics may complicate or conversely act as a protective factor in the adjustment to this significant family transition. The remaining caretaker's ability to act as a holding environment that projects a sense of normalcy and high morale will be important (Boothby, 1992; Perez-Foster, 2001). Whether or not the family is able to maintain a sense of family coherence (Falicov, 2002) will be critical. Are they able to expand the boundaries to include each point in the care-taking triangle? The ability to maintain authority as a parent is critical, and may be compromised if the parent feels guilty about leaving the child (Arnold, 1991; Burke, 1980; Falicov, 2002). Maintaining communication during the parents' absence is also linked to better outcomes, since inconsistent or minimal contact may be interpreted by the children as abandonment or not caring (Glasgow & Gouse-Shees, 1995). Phone calls, letters, tapes, photographs, and gifts play critical symbolic roles in keeping the flame of the relationship alive (Robertson & Robertson,

1971). Problems at the time of reunification may cause difficulties in the adjustment process. Often new unions have emerged—children may encounter new step-parents and siblings, and these transitions may be quite complicated (Arnold, 1991).

In spite of these challenges, children often display remarkable resilience in the face of the adversities of family separation. Of critical importance to the adjustment process is how the child makes meaning of the situation of separation from parents and other loved ones. If the child is well prepared for the separation, and if the separation is framed as temporary and necessary, undertaken for the good of the family, the separation will be much more manageable than if the child feels abandoned. Additionally, as our data suggest, separation followed by reunification, after an initial period of disorientation, may lead to an increased sense of closeness and intimacy in some families. Many of our participants viewed the relationship between parents and children as having increased in intensity because of the need to “make up for lost time.”

Family therapists should be aware of the phenomenon of separation in their assessments and treatment of immigrant families because it creates a challenge to family relations and development. For many children, the process is painful, and leads to a sense of longing for missing parents. The “context and circumstances” of the separation will play a critical role in different outcomes (Wolkind & Rutter 1985). If the separation is cooperatively managed by parent and caretakers, and if the accompanying losses are minimized, the child, though changed, may not necessarily be damaged by the experience. Future research will be required to further unpack the short- and long-term effects of the separation as well as ways to attenuate the effects of separation.

ENDNOTES

¹ The subscales of the Symptom checklist we used included the following items: "Lately, do you":

Depression: not have much energy, not feel like eating, cry easily, feel sad, feel not interested in much of anything, worry too much.

Interpersonal sensitivity: feel critical of others, feel shy, feel others do not understand you, feel people do not like you, feel like you are not as good as other people.

Cognitive functioning: have trouble remembering things, have trouble making decisions, have trouble concentrating.

Anxiety: feel nervous, feel something terrible is going to happen, feel like your heart is racing, feel tense, keep remembering something frightening.

Hostility: feel annoyed too easily, lose temper too easily, get into arguments too easily.

In addition to these items, the composite symptom scale also included the item, "have stomach aches," for a total of 26 items.

² We defined "parents" as biological or adoptive parents, to whom the child had formed an attachment bond.

³ Note that for all tables in this article, chi-square analyses reached the significance level of $p < .01$. Also please note that the percentages may not always add up to exactly 100% as all numbers were rounded.

⁴ All quotes have been translated from respondent's native language.

⁵ We do not claim that this sample is representative of the entire immigrant population in the United States, because it was not randomly generated all across the country. While we have data on immigrant youth coming from five sending centers, immigrant families coming from other countries may have lower (or higher) rates of separations. Further, as participants were recruited from public schools, it would not be inclusive of middle- and upper-status families who send their children to private or parochial schools. Therefore, it may be somewhat of an over-estimation of the prevalence of separations for all immigrants across socioeconomic levels. We are confident, however, that it is representative of immigrant

youth from these five sending regions attending public schools in the Boston and San Francisco areas. Although we cannot determine from this sample the exact proportion of immigrant youth affected, this study provides a strong indication of the magnitude of the phenomenon.

⁶ We include common-law arrangements in this category.

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