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# **Familismo in Mexican and Dominican Families From Low-Income, Urban Communities**

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## **Abstract**

*Familismo* has been described as a core cultural value for Latinos, but there have been few studies of its attitudinal and behavioral manifestations. We explored attitudinal and behavioral *familismo* using qualitative data collected from 23 Latina mothers who participated in an ethnographic study. The study employed semistructured interviews and participant observation methods carried out across 10 to 12 home visits for each participant. Results indicate that behavioral *familismo* manifests in five specific areas—financial support, shared daily activities, shared living, shared childrearing, and immigration—and functions as a dynamic construct that moves along a continuum of costs and benefits, over time and across situations, with implications for children’s development. The discussion highlights *familismo* as both a risk and protective factor for low-income, urban Latino families and underscores the importance of considering the balance between its costs and benefits in studies of Latino child development.

## **Keywords**

cultural values, *familismo*, Latinos, risk and protection

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Familism was defined in the early 1950s as a universal concept referring to “strong in-group feelings, emphasis on family goals, common property, mutual support, and the desire to pursue the perpetuation of the family” (Bardis, 1959, p. 340) and has been validated in subsequent studies across cultural groups (Nicholas, Stepick, & Stepick, 2008; Schwartz, 2007; Weine et al., 2006). Among Latinos, *familismo* has been identified as a core cultural value and has received a fair amount of attention in the literature (Villarreal, Blozis, & Widaman, 2005). Latinos have larger family networks, spend more time with family, and rely more on family for instrumental and emotional support relative to non-Latinos (Baca Zinn & Wells, 2000; Buriel & Rivera, 1980; Marin & Gamba, 2003; Shkodriani & Gibbons, 1995). Based on this literature, developmentalists have embraced the notion that, in spite of great heterogeneity, Latino culture emphasizes “the centrality of family life and its priority over other realities” (Arditti, 2006, p. 246). Indeed, studies show that Latino children are socialized to prioritize family (Updegraff, McHale, Whiteman, Thayer, & Delgado, 2005), with implications for children’s behavioral and academic functioning. *Familismo* has come to figure prominently in models of Latino child development (e.g., Szapocznik, Kurtines, Santisteban, & Rio, 1990) and parenting (e.g., Contreras, Narang, Ikhlas, & Teichman, 2002) and is oftentimes used to aid in the interpretation of empirical findings such as intervention outcomes (e.g., Gonzales, Dearnorff, Formoso, Barr, & Barrera, 2006) or Latinos’ greater preference for relative care over center-based care for their young children (e.g., Liang, Fuller, & Singer, 2000). Still, in spite of the advances made in the study of *familismo*, most studies to date have relied on a relatively narrow (i.e., cognitive) conceptualization of *familismo* (Domenech-Rodriguez, Zayas, & Oldman, 2007).

### *The Construct of Familismo*

When first introduced, familism was described primarily as a cognitive (i.e., beliefs, attitudes) construct. Regardless of this original emphasis, researchers currently conceptualize *familismo* as a multifaceted construct that can be understood in terms of attitudinal and behavioral manifestations (Keefe, 1984). Attitudinal *familismo* refers to feelings of loyalty, solidarity, and reciprocity among family members, comprising four core components: (a) belief that *family comes before the individual*, (b) *familial interconnect-edness*, (c) belief in *family reciprocity*, and (d) belief in *familial honor* (Lugo, Steidel, & Contreras, 2003). Behavioral *familismo* refers to the behaviors that reflect these beliefs, such as family help with childrearing. Empirical studies often fail to distinguish these components (Sabogal, Marin,

Otero-Sabogal, Marin, & Perez-Stable, 1987; Villarreal et al., 2005), and more often focus on attitudinal *familismo* while the behavioral component (e.g., living near or visiting kin, providing support) is neglected.

### *The Consequences of Familismo*

The ways in which *familismo* manifests in the everyday lives of Latino families (i.e., behavioral *familismo*) appear to have consequences for children's development. *Familismo* has been linked to lower rates of substance use (Gil, Wagner, & Vega, 2000; Horton & Gil, 2008), lower rates of behavior problems (Gamble & Modry-Mandell, 2008; German, Gonzales, & Dumka, 2009), and better psychological adjustment (Contreras, Lopez, Rivera-Mosquera, Raymond-Smith, & Rothstein, 1999). For Latino families, who face numerous obstacles in raising children including stressors related to poverty, acculturation, and discrimination, *familismo* may serve a protective role in children's development. Notably, however, there is also emerging evidence pointing to the potential costs of *familismo* (Baumann, Kuhlberg, & Zayas, 2010; Delgado, Updegraff, Roosa, & Umana-Taylor, 2011; Smokowski & Bacallao, 2007). For example, although *familismo* has been linked to academic effort as children are motivated to do well in school for the sake of the family (Esparza & Sánchez, 2008; La Roche & Shriberg, 2004), family obligations often interfere with academic success as they put a toll on children's time and energy that can lead to school absences, school dropout (Velez, 1989), and lower rates of college enrollment (Desmond & Turley, 2009). Moreover, the intensity of family bonds may actually increase the negative impact of familial conflict when it occurs (Hernandez, Ramirez Garcia, & Flynn, 2010), and conflict within family networks is predictive of individual psychological maladjustment (Rodriguez, Myers, Morris, & Cardoza, 2000). These studies suggest that *familismo* has great relevance for understanding not only protective but also risk processes in Latino child development.

Risk and protective processes form the basis of a number of heuristic frameworks of child development and oftentimes drive assessment and intervention efforts with children and families (Rutter, 1990; Yoshikawa, 1994). Typically, factors considered to pose risk increase the probability of problematic outcomes and are conceptualized as separate from those that offer protection. For example, poverty and mental health problems embody risk processes, whereas financial security and mental well-being are protective processes that can increase the probability of positive outcomes despite the presence of adversity or risk. Beyond these clear-cut dichotomies on risk and

protection, however, there exist other factors that may be more dynamic in their influence (Rutter, 1990). For example, the literature documents both positive and negative effects for adolescent mothers when grandparents are involved in childrearing. Living with grandparents provides financial and instrumental support, allows adolescent mothers to complete school, and prevents adolescent mothers from entering or remaining in unstable relationships with male partners. On the other hand, risk associated with living with grandparents is suggested by findings that adolescent mothers are less likely to develop their own childrearing skills, are less responsive to their infants, and are more likely to experience role conflict with their own mothers (Cooley & Unger, 1991; Spieker & Bensley, 1994). Clearly, considering the living arrangements of adolescent mothers as either a risk or protective process, over time and depending on context, provides the most complete picture of teen motherhood.

### *The Dynamic Nature of Familismo*

Inherent to the understanding that a given construct can result in both risk and protection is the idea that such a construct follows a dynamic course from day to day and over longer periods of time. Depending on the ecological and developmental context, the costs and benefits experienced by an individual may become significant enough to confer risk or protection at a given time point. Guided by literature that has highlighted the fluidity of family structures among immigrant populations (Suarez-Orozco, Todorova, & Louie, 2002) and similar to the concept of “dynamic coexistence” (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2008), we argue that *familismo* manifests along a continuum in which costs and benefits coexist and are in constant flux over time and across situations as families negotiate the complex interactions between traditional Latino and contemporary mainstream U.S. cultures.

### *The Present Study*

The overarching aim of the present study was to examine attitudinal and behavioral *familismo* as a dynamic construct that moves along a continuum of costs and benefits to confer risk and protection. Drawing from two ethnographic studies with Mexican and Dominican mothers, we sought to corroborate the definition of attitudinal *familismo* found in the literature (i.e., Lugo Steidel & Contreras, 2003), identify the behavioral manifestations of *familismo*, identify the ways in which *familismo* may be associated with both costs that present risks and benefits that provide protection for healthy child

development, and explore how *familismo* may follow a dynamic course, as expressed in changes over time and across settings. Our focus on Mexican and Dominican families allows for an examination of how a pan-Latino cultural value may manifest across distinct Latino subgroups. This study contributes to the literature by expanding current conceptualizations of *familismo* through the identification of specific familistic behaviors, because it is those behaviors that are costly or beneficial and have direct relevance to the developmental outcomes of children.

## Method

### Participants

Twenty-three Dominican (DA) and Mexican (MA) families who participated in one of two ethnographic studies were the participants for the present study. *Study 1* was an ethnographic study of 26 DA, MA, Puerto Rican, Chinese, and African American families in New York City (NYC); the five DA and four MA mothers were included in the present study. *Study 2* was an ethnography embedded within a larger study of 380 Chinese, African American, DA (30% of sample), and MA (25% of sample) mothers, also in NYC. A stratified random sample of the full sample was drawn for the embedded qualitative study (stratified by ethnic group and child gender). The final ethnographic sample consisted of 28 African American, Chinese, DA, and MA families. Of these, 9 MA and 8 DA families were included in the present study.

Study 1 participants were foreign-born except one DA mother. The average age of mothers was 34 years, and the children in these families were either between 3 months and 3 years or between 10 and 12 years (matching the target ages of two cohort samples of a larger study). All families reported a household income <250% of the federal poverty threshold (a study inclusion criteria). All the MA mothers were married and had an average household size of 5.2 (0.96), whereas two of the five DA mothers were married and had an average household size of 4.0 (1.4).

The 17 mothers from Study 2 were foreign-born except one DA mother and one MA mother. Mothers were 27 years old, on average, and children were between 2 and 8 months at the start of the study. All the MA mothers and five of the eight DA mothers were married. Household sizes averaged 5.2 (1.9) persons for MA families and 4.0 (0.93) persons for DA families.

The Mexicans in our sample (across the two studies) lived in neighborhoods that averaged only 7% Mexican, with a range from 0% to 27%, whereas

the Dominicans lived in neighborhoods that were on average 35% Dominican, with a range from 3% to 80%. The median income of the neighborhoods was \$25,282 for the Dominicans and \$28,943 for Mexicans. These analyses are based on data from 2000, the closest decennial census to the birth of the children in our sample; neighborhoods are defined as U.S. census tracts.

### *Procedure*

The ethnographies that yielded the data are part of a series of larger, multi-year studies of the roles of multiple social settings on developmental processes in ethnically diverse and immigrant families in NYC. In Study 1, DA, MA, Puerto Rican, Chinese, and African American mothers were recruited from hospitals and community agencies serving low-income families. Study 2 included each of these groups except Puerto Ricans, and mothers were recruited exclusively from postpartum wards. The eligibility criteria included ethnicity, poverty status (Study 1 only), mother's age (>18 years), and for mothers of infants, healthy full-term babies.

In Study 1, trained, bilingual fieldworkers visited families in their homes every 8 to 10 weeks over an approximate 16-month time period, resulting in an average of six visits per family. Training of all field workers occurred in full-team meetings, across a period of several months. Training focused on interviewing techniques, with practice interviews recorded and reviewed by the whole team, and field work techniques, including multiple exercises for participant observation and field note writing. During the data collection periods, all field workers were supervised individually, in small groups specific to the ethnicity and language of their participant families, and in large groups with the full research team. In addition, each supervisor provided feedback on every set of field notes and interview transcripts. Family visits consisted of a mix of semistructured interviews and participant observation. The semistructured interview protocol included five modules, conducted in five separate visits. The first module covered the basic background information for mother and father, important figures in the child's life, and the family's daily routine. The second covered child care, experiences of hardship and coping or survival strategies, and attitudes toward and experiences of community and government assistance programs. The third covered immigration experiences, educational goals for the child, and the mother's own educational experiences. The fourth covered parenting, gender issues, and the mother–father relationship. The final semistructured module included questions about work and neighborhood contexts. Sample questions included the following: “Is your baby in anyone else's care besides you? Tell me about

that arrangement,” “Tell me about your day yesterday—starting from the moment you woke up to when you went to bed,” and “If the child goes out where does she/he go? With whom?” Mothers were interviewed in the language of their choice (e.g., Spanish or English). Interviews lasted between 2 and 3 hours and were audiotaped.

During visits that did not include an interview, field workers used participant-observation methods and engaged in unstructured conversation and interaction in a variety of settings (e.g., child care, workplace, welfare office, and homes of various network members). In their participant observation, field workers were encouraged to keep track of topics relevant to the study, but there were no set conversation cues. The methods for Study 2 were the same as those described above except: (a) there was no early adolescent sample, (b) the semistructured interview modules were slightly revised (i.e., minor rewording of some questions; additional probing of some topics) based on the experience of field workers in Study 1. For more details on study methodology, see Yoshikawa (2011).

## Data Analyses

Data consist of field notes, written in English after each visit by the field worker, and interview audiotapes for the semistructured visits, which were first transcribed in Spanish, then translated into English by bilingual graduate students, and finally checked for accuracy by a bilingual supervisor using the back-translation procedure. The data were then indexed, according to topic. Fifteen indices (i.e., categories) were created by the principal investigators and associate researchers of the larger study. Categories included the following: Child care (e.g., *schedule, costs*), Academics/School (e.g., *school engagement, future goals*), Work (e.g., *work history*), Immigration (e.g., *immigration experiences*), Parenting (e.g., *practices, beliefs*), Neighborhood/Housing (e.g., *neighborhood safety*), Background Characteristics (e.g., *maternal education*), and Ethnicity/Race/Gender (e.g., *ethnic identity*). Indexing was conducted by the field workers and additional research assistants using EthnoNotes and Atlas ti software (<http://www.atlasti.com>; Lieber, Weisner, & Presley, 2003). All staff was trained across multiple training sessions on the specific constructs, feedback was given during the indexing process, and repeated tests were done on randomly chosen material to ensure that the team was indexing consistently.

In the current study, we focused on the umbrella code for *Family*, which included all statements that referenced family members, both immediate and extended, and also captured any reference to family across other codes, such



as immigration experiences and parenting practices. After extracting all data with the *Family* code, the authors analyzed the data for themes. Data analysis was done using transcribed and translated data, though the lead author is Spanish-speaking and Latina. Our thematic analysis involved identifying common threads within and across interviews (Padgett, 1998). Specifically, after careful review of each transcript, a list of themes was generated, and themes identified across participants were retained and used to guide a more in-depth review of the data. Analyses were conducted within case (i.e., for a given participant), followed by analysis across cases. Illustrative text was extracted for each theme. Coding was reviewed in regular meetings between the first and second authors, and discrepancies were resolved through consensus. Coding was completed for each participant's transcript, regardless of whether saturation had been reached on a particular theme or code within a subset of the transcripts. We identified our research questions a priori (i.e., corroboration of attitudinal *familismo* and behavioral manifestations of *familismo*), although in coding for behavioral familismo, we allowed the data to determine which themes would emerge (e.g., whether related to costs and benefits or not).

## Results and Discussion

### *Attitudinal Familismo*

As a preliminary aim, we sought evidence for the attitudinal definition of *familismo* (Lugo Steidel & Contreras, 2003) by looking for themes consistent with its four components.

The belief that *family comes before the individual* involves individual sacrifice of needs and desires for the sake of family and was expressed by mothers in the study. For example, one MA mother, who as a teenager chose to attend high school rather than care for her siblings, expressed her conflicted feelings about having to put her own needs above those of her family: "And so I left, and then I regretted it because my mother needed me. I didn't regret having studied, but my mother and my siblings needed me." Importantly, the expectation that children put familial needs ahead of individual needs appears to continue into adulthood, as suggested by this mother: "My brother, even today when he is grown up, after having worked, he gives my mother all the money and my mother gives him some money for him. She says, 'This is for you, spend it.'"

*Interconnectedness* (i.e., "that adults should keep a strong emotional and physical bond with the family although they may be independent in many aspects of their personal life"; Lugo Steidel & Contreras, 2003, p. 314) was

expressed through numerous spontaneous statements related to family bonds, such as “My mother taught us to be united” and “You have to help each other out, you know be there for each other, especially you know when you’re growing up, or, you know when you have families, I mean that togetherness is very important, you know?” Mothers also spoke of the importance of maintaining family bonds even as adults separate and become independent in other spheres of their lives. The sisters of one mother were described as: “A little more educated . . . they’re go-getters. But they also have that thing of family, that they try to stay close to family and help out family and things like that.”

The notion of *familial reciprocity* involves an obligation to provide whatever support is needed by other family members whenever that support is called for. For example, mothers generally spoke about the reliance of immediate family members on one another (“But I say, if something comes up, there’s my brother, I have a brother.”), but also included reference to extended family members:

If something happens to us, we behave as if we were siblings. If something happens . . . we call him, so he tells us what to do. . . . Yes, we have loved each other, more . . . how can I tell you? Like siblings. I mean we are cousins, [but] I can count on him for anything.

This support is certainly viewed as reciprocal, as suggested by this mother:

I rely on them for any emergency that I may have. That’s why I am with them. I help them in every way I possibly can. If they need me, at whatever hour, I go, because they never refuse [to help] me. If they are in the hospital, I stay all the time with them. Because they treat me well. When I had [my] illness, they helped me a lot . . . they didn’t leave me alone.

Finally, attitudinal *familismo* includes a *belief in familial honor* in which “individuals have the duty to upkeep and protect the family name and honor and, if need be, actively defend it” (Lugo Stiedel & Contreras, 2003, p. 315). Mothers talked about the need to protect each other from hostility from the outside world. For instance, a DA mother who worked with her sister described a situation in which a coworker had a conflict with her sister:

She (the co-worker) would just make our lives miserable until one day she said, “blablabla.” And I said, “What? You don’t talk about my sister like that.” You know? I got very emotional, too. Because I was like, you’re talking about my blood like that.

**Table 1.** Behavioral Manifestations of *Familismo* in Mexican and Dominican Families From Low-income, Urban Communities

	Cost/Risk	Benefit/Protection
Financial Support	Financial strain related to providing financial support to others	Access to familial financial resources
Shared Living	Financial cost of supporting live-in family members Conflict with live-in family members Exposure to negative role models Overcrowding	Financial assistance with living costs Social and childrearing support Exposure to positive role models
Shared Daily Activities		Social support (emotional and instrumental)
Childrearing	Coparenting conflict	Childrearing support
Immigration Support	Financial strain; safety concerns; separation from family of origin or extended family in country of origin; social isolation	Financial and instrumental support during immigration Financial and educational opportunities as afforded by living in the United States

Another mother revealed what may be an important motivation for familial honor: “[My son] represents whatever I taught him. I always tell him that. ‘You make me. When you do something great, you make me look great. When you mess up, you make me look bad.’” In other words, each individual reflects to such a great extent on the larger family that each must act honorably for the sake of the family. Likewise, when a family member’s honor is at stake, it is synonymous with dishonor of the whole family.

### *Behavioral Familismo*

Next, we examined the ways in which *familismo* manifested in the behaviors of MA and DA families within a low-income, urban context. Five primary themes emerged from the data as domains within which familistic behaviors were displayed: financial support, shared living, shared daily activities, immigration support, and childrearing. Notably, each of these themes has been identified in the extant literature, but few studies have explored them in depth (Table 1).

**Financial support.** Financial dependence on family members was described by all the mothers in our sample, who relied on extended family members for informal and formal financial support. Most commonly, family members

provided support in the case of emergencies or unexpected expenses, as described by one mother:

I borrow something from someone in my family if I have any emergency. I am ashamed, but, I have been lucky that it has always been my family, and if they see that I'm in trouble, they always help me . . . and if I have to borrow some money, \$100 or \$200, they don't make me pay it all at once. (They say) "However you can, if you can't give it to me all at once." But they don't insist if they see that I can't pay.

Although family loans were avoided unless necessary, these loans were common—given the necessity ("I have asked my mom for money, and I think about it, if my mom wasn't there, I would be in lots of trouble, because I wouldn't be able to pay those bills, you know. It's really hard."), and were generally deemed acceptable. In contrast, friends were not typically relied on for financial support, "Cause it's like my mom taught us, you know, don't borrow from friends."

Among MA families, financial support networks were formalized through a strategy called *tanda*, in which a group of family members pool their earnings to be given to one of the players. Individuals alternate taking the pot of money and in this way, save their money as they earn it and receive it in bulk to pay off monthly bills. Although *tanda* can include nonfamily members, there are risks to including friends, as described by this mother: "No! Even if you know the people, when it's their turn, they don't want to give the money, or they disappear, they change their address, and the money is lost." DA financial support networks were formalized through shared banking. Mothers passed on their earnings to a family member who held a bank account and all banking services for many family members were funneled through a single account. One mother described how her brother planned to get a loan from the bank in his name for her to start her own business, while another received a loan directly from her brother to start her business.

Patterns of financial exchange between low-income families have been described extensively in the literature (Eggebeen & Hogan, 1990; Lee & Aytac, 1998). In our study, the most common financial arrangement between extended family members was to share the cost of living. Most mothers had coliving situations in which numerous extended family members contributed to the bills: "We don't live here by ourselves [because] the rents are excessive; it's very hard."

*Shared living.* Even without financial necessity, however, we found that several generations choose to live together, as expressed by this mother who

was referring to her own mother: "She wants to gather us up in one little tent . . . living all together." Several mothers described moving in with a parent or grandparent at the time of marriage or motherhood, whereas others lived with their parents only until they started their own families. Families commonly had keys to each other's homes to come and go regularly:

Yes, sometimes we see each other three times a week; when I don't go over there, they come over here. They have the key; they come whenever they want to. At night, they spend the night here. You never know, you go to bed . . . but you never know [if someone is going to come].

Some family members engaged in these informal overnight stays for convenience, such as when work or child care arrangements were closer to another family member's home. Often, however, they were simply family visits.

*Shared daily activities.* As a natural extension of shared living arrangements, all participants stated that they spent most of their nonworking time with family. Mealtimes were typically shared daily between family members who lived in and out of the home: "We stop by my mom's house, we usually eat . . . stay there for a while, and then we all come together to Brooklyn." Families also commonly shared daily activities ranging from errands to recreational outings. "We'll go with them [family] to wherever they need to go; to the stores, to the park. . . . We don't like to be alone." Oftentimes family members from different households accompanied each other on errands out of necessity, such as to provide translation services or transportation. Mothers called family members with cars to take them to doctor appointments, grocery stores, and work ("my nephews who have cars bring me [shopping]").

Beyond necessity, participants expressed a strong preference for the company of family to that of nonfamily members. Mothers saw their extended family members daily or at minimum, several times per week; a week without a family visit was noteworthy. One field worker noted, "It is always the case that relatives stop by while we are doing the interview and [we are] interrupted." Describing visits to her own mother's house, a DA mother noted, "Even if I wanted to go to some other place, first I had to go to her house. Or I had to call and say 'I'll go later,' because [she] was so close to me." There seemed to be an explicit expectation that adult children spend most of their time with extended family. One mother expressed surprise that, in reference to her sister, "We haven't seen her for a while . . . maybe a week." Another mother described her family's reaction to an adult sister's failure to visit: "Alicia hasn't been going [to our mother's home]. Ever since,

it's been like two weeks, she went to the Dominican Republic, came back, and she still has not come back to the house. My mom is like 'Come home!'"

These expectations do not appear to be the result of simply being immigrant, but rather arise from and are reinforced through childhood experiences in which the extended family functions as the hub of most social activities. Mothers described childhood memories of spending much of their time with extended family in their countries of origin:

It was nice, growing up in a big family, you never feel alone. We had family on both sides and all of us, we were very close. We would hang out together, we would go to dances and parties together. It was really nice.

For girls, this may have served to prevent unsupervised recreational time with boys. Consistent with the high levels of monitoring of adolescent girls relative to boys found in Latino families (Staples & Mirande, 1980), one mother in our sample, in describing the courtship between her mother and father, stated: "She was always surrounded by her cousins and aunts, so she was too expensive for him: he had to invite her and her entourage. So at times, he couldn't afford it." For another mother, this "chaperoning" that started in childhood continued into adulthood:

As long as I went out with one of my brothers, I was OK. But I had to have a chaperone. As a matter of fact, it's funny, because he chaperoned me when I was younger and even now he'll like, you know, even if I have to do something or go somewhere. . . . I call him, he'll come and he'll chaperone.

Similarly, parental monitoring of children continued into adulthood: "We're pretty old now, we're 34, 33, and [with] my brother . . . [my mother] is like, 'When is he coming here and when is he leaving?' You know, that's her way." There was no indication that this monitoring was related to safety or other concerns, as during adolescence; rather, it seemed to reflect the expectation that the family continue to serve as the primary socializing agent at all ages, even beyond childhood.

*Immigration support.* Consistent with past research (Berkman & Glass, 2000; Menjivar, 2000; Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008), extended family networks were described as the organizing force and support for the immigration process. For example, immigration was often motivated

by the financial needs of the family (e.g., “I had to leave. They were scarce of money.”). Young adults came to the United States, sometimes temporarily, to make enough money for specific family needs in the country of origin, as in this case of an adult brother who “came mostly to get money together for the operation [of our mother].” More generally, immigration was planned and financed by extended family, and family members often immigrated together. One mother explained,

That man who brought us, brought about eight [persons] . . . to Queens (NY). And my husband’s cousin came in a station wagon to pick us up. Then she gave the money to the coyote and he delivered us.

Another mother was awaiting the arrival of her sister from Mexico. She and her brother had each paid \$1,500 to a coyote who was currently en route with the sister. Interestingly, another sister from this family had not been asked to make a financial contribution for the immigration of the sister coming from Mexico because of her own considerable financial stress. In extensive field notes, she was described as angry and offended, feelings that may have reflected a breach of her own firm belief in family reciprocity.

*Childrearing.* Coparenting is one way in which *familismo* is believed to manifest (Baca Zinn & Wells, 2000). In the present study, the theme of childrearing was introduced repeatedly in the context of discussions about extended family. Mothers relied heavily on family members for advice, child care, and, in some cases, sending children back to the Dominican Republic or Mexico to live with extended family. Most commonly, children were living with their biological mothers but were cared for by extended family (“With my children, I know I can count on my family.”). A grandmother of one of the participant children explained that she saw her grandson, with whom she did not live, “from when he wakes up until he goes to bed.” Another family had formally taken on the responsibility of raising a cousin’s daughter, “Karin.” Field worker notes summarize the arrangement:

Karin’s mom was in the States, but had to leave because her mom who was in Mexico got sick; she needed to return to take care of her. She left the child with the father, but the father works too much and is unable to take care of Karin. So, Gloria is taking care of her. Gloria tells me that when her cousin (Karin’s father) brought Karin over, he handed her all her papers. He just said, “Keep her, I can’t.” She thought that he had wanted her to adopt Karin, but in reality he just wanted her to raise her. When Gloria agreed to take Karin in, she felt bad asking

Karin's father for money. However, now she feels that she is not able to provide for her and her other children without some financial support from Karin's father. Gloria discussed this issue with her husband and her mother in Mexico, both advised her to ask Karin's father for \$100 a month.

Importantly, in spite of the added financial stressor of taking in an additional child, this mother's attitude toward the responsibility of raising her cousin's child was, "While she's here in the house, I'll love her as much as [my own children]."

Rates of transnational childrearing in the early years (i.e., sending young children to live with relatives abroad) appear relatively low for DAs and MAs (Gaytan, Xue, Yoshikawa, & Tamis-LeMonda, 2011). Similarly, in the present study, sending children abroad was reserved for cases in which mothers had no other childcare options,

Once I had to take him [over there] because of circumstances, problems. . . . I had no one to take care of him and I had to take him over there. He was over there for 7 months, so during those 7 months, I went 2 times to visit him.

Alternately, children were sent abroad when mothers felt their child had specific needs that could better be addressed within the country of origin. One mother related about her son,

I thought he was going to be mute. He was almost 3 and he didn't talk. A neighbor told me, "Send him to Santo Domingo [DR] and you will see how he comes back talking because here, he doesn't have any boys to talk to." So over there, he was surrounded by the family atmosphere and he learned to talk.

Several mothers had themselves been raised by extended family and viewed this arrangement as stressful but normative.

### *Risk and Protection*

*Familismo as a protective process.* The descriptions provided above illustrate the benefits of *familismo*; family members play a critical role in childrearing, facilitate the immigration process for first-generation Latinos, and provide much needed financial and social support. The monetary and social



support that results from familistic behaviors is expected to promote children's well-being by facilitating parent's use of positive and effective parenting practices (McLoyd, 1998). Moreover, family members seem to genuinely enjoy spending time together and appreciate having family as the hub of their social activities. In the face of numerous stressors such as financial strain, acculturative stress, and discrimination, Latinos' dependence on familial support—as manifested within the domains of financial support, shared living and daily activities, immigration, and childrearing—can be essential for survival. Survival was complicated by mothers' sense of isolation (“When I just arrived, I didn't know anybody, I couldn't count on anybody.”), as close relationships with nonfamily members were highly uncommon. One DA mother, when asked whether she had relationships with anyone outside of her family network, replied to the field worker, “You are my only friend.”

The reliance on family to the exclusion of nonfamily was in part related to mistrust of others:

There's trust there with my family, you know, with my brothers. But everybody else, no. I don't care who it is, you know. You don't bring anyone to my home. I don't care who it is. Unless it's your mother, your brother, no one knocks at my door. None of your friends, I don't wanna hear it.

Mistrust of outsiders was especially seen in the domain of childrearing. As documented in the literature (Buriel & Hurtado-Ortiz, 2000), mothers in the present study tended not to leave their children in the care of a nonfamily member. As expressed by one mother, “The contrary to what is good—the family—would be to leave him in a daycare.” Another mother emphasized, “I won't leave her . . . at anyone's house. Unless it's . . . her grandmother.”

Experiences of discrimination reinforced such feelings of mistrust. One mother talked about a recent experience of her young nephew:

My nephew has a teacher who she says she doesn't live here in the neighborhood, “in the *barrio*,” because here we live with mice and cockroaches. (She spoke) that way, to the children. She then said that her house is very big and pretty and that she has two cars (and that) we don't care about that. Then some other child threw away a piece of trash [and the teacher said], “When he grows up, he'll be like that, like trash.”

In sum, among low-income urban families, family members were the primary if not only source of instrumental and emotional support in part because nonfamily members could not be trusted to provide this much needed support. Given this social context, *familismo* provides clear benefits by ensuring the support needed for survival.

*Familismo as a risk process.* Along with the notable benefits provided by *familismo*, however, came perceived costs. The notion that there are disadvantages to maintaining a high level of *familismo* is not new (Keefe, 1984), and from its inception, *familismo* was defined as the “subordination of individual interests to those of the family group” (Rogers & Sebald, 1962, p. 26, emphasis added), particularly in reference to material rewards. Our data, too, suggested that mothers struggled with the behavioral expectations and norms of *familismo* because of its costs.

*Financial obligations.* Although there were clear benefits to receiving financial support from family (e.g., assurance that bills would be paid, means to open a small business), mothers too had the responsibility of providing financial support to others, increasing their own financial strain (Ornelas, Perreira, Beeber, & Maxwell, 2009). In discussing why she had problems paying the rent, one mother said, “Always the same. Always because of some [extended] family need.” Some mothers had reached their tolerance for the give and take of monetary support: “One of my sisters [borrowed \$500]; she still hasn’t paid me. There’s no excuse. She needed help, so I gave it to her [because we’re sisters]. She says, ‘Oh, eventually . . .’ I’m sick of it.” There is strong evidence for the negative impact of financial strain on parenting, which in turn is directly linked to the well-being of children (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; McLoyd, 1998).

*Shared living.* Shared living provided mothers with additional financial support (i.e., shared rent and utility bills) but significant costs were also associated with this domain of *familismo*. Past studies with immigrant Latina mothers document that social obligations can intensify stress and contribute to depression (Ornelas et al., 2009). In the current study, one mother explained:

It’s more difficult here. Everything changed. But I say, it’s a favor I’m doing for her. She’s my sister. I shouldn’t leave her out in the street. I offered for her to come here . . . because she didn’t have anywhere to go. In the first place, she doesn’t have a bank account. In the second, she doesn’t have social security. You can’t do anything. And it depends on how much the husband is making. So in the meantime, she is here with me. It’s going to be two months. . . . And with children,

it's difficult. . . . She has four children . . . and three of mine. First, the space. And second, mine can't take out their toys because hers want them all. They want everything. Sometimes I have to get [my] girls into the room and have them stay there . . . to avoid problems. I myself feel quite stressed, but it's not a matter of saying, "Go away," just like that. . . . I don't know what I am going to do. I tell Amy, "Don't fight any more, they are going to leave." "When? I don't have room to play, I don't have any room," that's what my girl tells me. "Can't you tell me when are they going to leave?"

In addition to the lack of space for the needs of the immediate family and conflict between family members, costs of shared living included the following: (a) lack of consistency in household composition ("Actually today I am going to speak to her because I need to know if she is going to stay or go."); (b) financial burden related to housing family members who were not able to contribute to household expenses ("If I had someone else living here [besides] Alex, who doesn't work, that I could charge about 200 dollars, it would be a help. Another person, you see?"); and (c) stress related to the problems of live-in family members, as shown in the fieldworker notes below:

Zara (the participant) was going to wait another day before she would notify the police of her cousin's absence. Zara hates having to do this, but she gets very worried and if Vanessa keeps this up (leaving the house for days without notice), they're going to have to kick her out of the apartment. They had only allowed her back on the conditions that she not keep doing this, attend English classes and get a job.

Sam (the participant's husband) told a live-in cousin that he can do whatever he wants once he leaves the house, but in their home he cannot do drugs. I asked what the cousin's reaction had been and she said that he had just stayed quiet and hadn't responded. He has this week to decide what he wants to do. Xenia (the participant) in a way, hopes that he'll [stay and] help contribute to rent so that she will have an extra \$150 in her pocket for her children.

As documented in the literature, children are significantly affected by the substance use of a family member in the home. Family homes characterized by substance use problems tend to be more chaotic and unstable and have higher levels of conflict, all of which increase the risk for childhood mental

health problems (National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, 2005).

*Immigration.* It is through familial support that mothers had the opportunity of immigrating to the United States. Yet immigration was associated with feelings of guilt and isolation (Ornelas et al., 2009). One MA mother, who immigrated with her fiancée, talked of her guilt:

I wrote a letter in which I told my mother that I was leaving, that I was coming here: I'm going North to work and I will send you a lot of money so that you can buy all you need. . . . But I had a regret that I couldn't [bear]. At night I cried a lot, thinking, how did it happen? I left my mother, I left my brothers. I couldn't bear it; it felt awful.

This mother seemed to be struggling with choosing between her family of origin and her husband, and years later had still not reconciled her decision to leave her mother.

In a separate discussion, this mother talked of the need for her family of origin in her new environment: "I didn't have anyone, anyone. And I didn't count on anyone. . . . I was alone, because my husband had cousins, but I didn't." Certainly, isolation may be experienced by all new immigrants as they settle into an unfamiliar community. For many, including Latinos, this sense of isolation may be exacerbated because of the particularly intimate ties with family-of-origin members who are left behind in their countries of origin ("Separating from [my mother] was like separating from my heart."). Our data suggest that isolation was felt most acutely by MA mothers. This finding is consistent with past research showing that compared with DAs, MAs in NYC live in neighborhoods with much lower concentrations of other MAs and report lower levels of available social support (Yoshikawa, 2011), which in part may reflect the migration history of a particular group into a specific region.

Finally, immigration resulted in the expected financial burdens on mothers. Most MA families paid coyotes who brought other family members. One mother had loaned her cousin money to pay the coyote who brought him to the United States, and although he was working and living in her home rent-free, he had not repaid any of it. Also, both MA and DA mothers felt the responsibility of sending remittances to family members in their country of origin, even when they felt significant financial strain themselves. One mother felt that her husband had to choose between providing for her and their children or sending remittances to his mother in Mexico. Responding to

whether her husband sends money to his own mother, she said: “Now he’s not. The situation is difficult. [Before] she would call him to send her money, so he would have to, even though he would leave me without money.” Remittances may be an important way in which immigrants honor ties with family members who remain in their country of origin.

*Childrearing.* The familial support mothers received in raising their children provided essential instrumental and emotional support around issues of childrearing. Yet Latina mothers who relied on extended family members to raise their children faced challenges in selecting mutual childrearing goals and strategies that strained their own relationships. One Spanish (only)-speaking mother described the ways in which her bilingual father-in-law, who was involved in the daily care of her three children, continually undermined her as an authority, particularly as her children got older, spoke more English, and received homework assignments in English. Others noted the difficulties in forming a strong mother–child bond because their young children were cared for so often by other family members (“She got too attached to my mom because she’d be the whole day with her. . . . Yeah, she was confusing my mom with [me]”). In the following excerpt, a mother describes how conflicts in childrearing cascaded into multiple problems:

My mother . . . she wants to be a parent to my son and, it’s like . . . my parenting wasn’t good enough for her. And my son actually at one point thought that was his mother. ‘Cause she, you know, she set down the rules and we were living together and it was like really hard for me to be a parent. She shouldn’t have done that with my son, because that’s my son. And then that caused conflict in the household; a lot of conflict. That’s when I had to leave. ‘Cause I knew that I couldn’t do it (parenting) there. And then when I left, that’s when my son started acting up.

Such conflict between caregivers has been linked to children’s socioemotional and behavioral development, with children from high-conflict families showing poor emotional and behavioral functioning relative to others (Belsky, Putnam, & Crnic, 1996; McHale & Rasmussen, 1998).

### *The Dynamic Nature of Familismo*

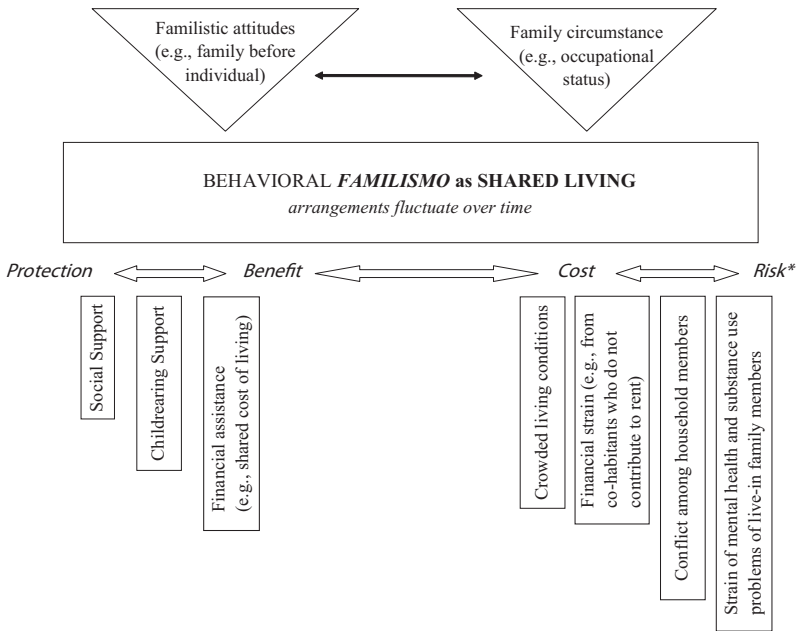
Our third aim was to examine changes, either over time or across settings, in the manifestations of *familismo*, and our data indeed indicated that familistic behaviors are not static but are constantly shifting over time. This flux could

be seen across domains, but we focus specifically on the domain of shared living as a salient illustration.

Harry is a 10-month-old Mexican-origin infant who lived with his parents and sister in a two-bedroom apartment that was shared with his uncle's family at the start of the study. Over the course of the 12-month study, the living arrangements in Harry's home changed *nine* times as extended family members moved in, out, and back in, depending on their own life circumstances (e.g., arriving from Mexico, obtaining or losing employment). At the close of study when Harry was 21 months old, he was living with seven adults and four other children.

Maya is an 8-month-old Dominican-origin infant who lived with her parents and two older siblings at the start of the study. Over the course of the 12-month study, Maya's maternal aunt, who was single and had become pregnant, moved in to the home temporarily until Maya's mother rented her a room in another apartment. Otherwise, Maya lived only with her immediate family for the duration of the 12-month study, though her paternal grandfather came to the apartment daily to take the children to and from school, help care for the children and eat his meals.

As illustrated in the case examples above, both MA and DA mothers described family members moving in with them, often unexpectedly, over time. Notably, though, the living arrangements for most MA families (e.g., Harry's family) changed often and frequently, and the living arrangements of DA families (e.g., Maya's family) showed more stability; this apparent group difference may reflect the greater financial stability and access to social services such as public housing among the NYC Dominican community (Yoshikawa, 2011). There is no evidence from the present findings that these changes represented a shift in the underlying attitudes that dictate that individuals put family needs before their own. In fact, past studies show that familistic attitudes remain strong, even as familistic behaviors decrease, suggesting that attitudes and behaviors follow unique developmental courses (Sabogal et al., 1987). Instead, the changes in shared living observed in the present study appeared to come from the natural fluctuations in the social circumstances of Latino families living with financial insecurity. As suggested by Figure 1, familistic behaviors may be predicted by an interaction of underlying attitudes and family circumstances.



**Figure 1.** The consequences of behavioral *familismo* conceptualized as the dynamic interplay between development and family circumstance

\*Consequences specific to home setting.

Regardless of their cause or frequency, changes in living arrangements were associated with coinciding shifts in perceived costs and benefits. For example, when an extended family member who moved into the home was unable to offer financial support toward the household expenses, the perceived cost of *familismo* increased until that family member secured paid work. Perceived benefits appeared to increase if a family member who was able to care for the children in a supportive way moved in. Costs and benefits often coexisted, as when a family member who did not contribute to the rent but who provided considerable social support to the mother moved in to the home. Further underscoring the complex and dynamic nature of behavioral *familismo*, what may be perceived as costly in one setting may be perceived as a benefit in another. For example, in the case of Maya (described above), the presence of the paternal grandfather contributes to conflict in the home setting but at the same time better prepares Maya for the school setting as he

teaches her English. Rather than representing separate, dichotomous processes, such costs and benefits (leading to risk and protection) appear to coexist and work in tandem to influence child development.

## Conclusions

The present study supports the notion of *familismo* as a multifaceted dynamic construct that manifests in ways that have perceived costs and benefits for Latino (i.e., MA, DA) families. Our findings provide evidence for the familial attitudes identified in the literature (Lugo Steidel & Contreras, 2003) and indicate some of the behavioral manifestations of *familismo*. Notably, there were clear similarities in the familistic behaviors across the two ethnic groups in the current study. For both MA and DA families, *familismo* manifested across the domains of financial support, shared living, shared daily activities, immigration, and childrearing. However, although the behavioral manifestations were similar, our study suggests potential group differences in the perceived costs and benefits associated with *familismo*, perhaps because MA mothers in NYC are part of a more recently immigrated population with higher rates of poverty, social isolation, and crowded, unstable living conditions than other Latino groups (Yoshikawa, 2011). The ecological context into which families migrate is believed to influence how *familismo* is expressed and experienced (Reese, 2002), and in our sample of families living in poverty, the costs and benefits appeared great due to scarce financial resources and limited extrafamilial social networks. *Familismo* may manifest differently, and its costs and benefits be perceived differently, among Latinos who do not experience financial strain, undocumented status, and other stressful living conditions. Thus, replication of these findings with a larger, more diverse Latino sample is important to ensure generalization beyond low-income samples. Specifically, variations associated with sociodemographic variables and across Latino subgroups (e.g., Cubans, Puerto Ricans) should be examined empirically in future studies of *familismo*.

In the present study, mothers' narratives clearly revealed the benefits of *familismo*. Despite the possibility for protection by engaging in familistic behaviors and socializing children in *familismo*, however, our findings highlight the complexities associated with maintaining this important Latino value. The emotional and financial costs were high, and our study suggests that family members cannot easily extricate themselves from engaging in familistic behaviors (positive or negative), perhaps because the struggle for survival among low-income Latino families reifies the beliefs of *familismo*.



because of the important benefits familistic behaviors confer. Thus, there are likely costs and benefits for Latino families at all times, often coexisting and regularly shifting, though there may be periods of relative stability for a given family. We argue that for each family, the number and nature of benefits weighed against those of costs may be a key determinant in whether *familismo* ultimately serves a risk or protective function for children's functioning at a given time point on a given developmental outcome of interest, as manifested in a specific setting.

As a broad construct encompassing both cognitions and behaviors, *familismo* may be viewed as a set of interrelated risk and protective factors that are each uniquely linked with Latino youth functioning. Empirical studies are needed to examine such links and to inform prevention and intervention efforts with Latino families. *Familismo* has consistently been regarded as a central cultural value that should be incorporated into mental health interventions (Falicov, 2009), and several studies indicate its potential as a protective factor for Latino youth (Contreras et al., 1999; Gamble & Modry-Mandell, 2008; German et al., 2009; Gil et al., 2000; Horton & Gil, 2008). Our study corroborates the centrality and benefits of *familismo* in the everyday lives of Latino families, but we caution against the notion of promoting *familismo* uniformly, across all domains, families, and ecologies. Instead, in line with ecodevelopmental theory (Szapocznik & Coatsworth, 1999), we recommend the careful deconstruction of familistic beliefs and behaviors and a clinical assessment of the extent to which each may pose risk *or* offer protection within the context in which it manifests for a given Latino family. Recognition for the myriad and intricate ways in which *familismo* may influence child development can only serve to improve our services for the Latino population in the United States.

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