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When Two Roads Diverge: How Language Barriers Undermine Immigrant Parental Authority

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Abstract:

In the United States, immigrant families are one of the fastest growing and most diverse segments of the population (Zhou, 1997). Researchers have studied many facets of the immigration process that these families go through, such as acculturation gaps (Weiskirch & Alva, 2002), ethnic identity (Hurtado & Gurin, 1987), youth violence (Boutakidis, Guerra, & Soriano, 2006), and parenting styles (Nguyen, 2008). One construct that surfaces often in these studies is immigrant parental authority; some researchers hypothesize that the immigration experience could shift the authority structure in immigrant homes. The purpose of this literature review is to examine language barriers between immigrant parents and children as a possible cause of this authority shift and to synthesize how that shift is manifest in intellectual, social, and ethnic identity. The review focuses first on the perspective of immigrant parents, second on the perspective of their adolescent children, and concludes that language barriers have a powerful influence on parental authority from both perspectives.

Keywords: immigrant parents/adolescents, language barriers, parental authority, acculturation, intergenerational relations

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Introduction

Mario came to the United States when he was just 8 years old. Soft-spoken, shy, and very intelligent, he was just one of the hundreds of Cape Verdean adolescents in Boston's most immigrant-heavy neighborhoods. Mario's parents immigrated in search of a better life for their children, fleeing economic depression and lack of opportunity in the hope that the Cape Verdean community in Boston could provide a better home. By sixteen, Mario was completely fluent in English and caught between two cultures; he was winning awards at school and then returning home to a tiny, dilapidated apartment funded by his parents' work at the hospital laundromat. They spoke only Cape Verdean Creole at home. This young man lived in a world both culturally and linguistically divided along generational lines. Mario remembered little of Cape Verde and, while genuinely respectful of his parents' language and culture, faced a constant academic and social disconnect with them. These language and culture barriers are not unique to Mario or even the Cape Verdean community in Boston — in fact, they are faced by millions of immigrant families across the United States.

Significant psychological study has been devoted to immigrants' intergenerational conflicts here in the United

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States, with many researchers focusing specifically on language barriers within immigrant families. Although the diverse and mobile nature of this population makes it difficult to study linguistic situations like Mario's, enough significant research has been done to create an effective picture of their acculturation struggle. Quantitative studies often focus on measurable interactions like language brokering and how they affect factors like parent-adolescent closeness and cultural tradition (e.g. Roche, Lambert, Ghazarian, & Little, 2015; Weisskirch & Alva, 2002). Interestingly, qualitative studies often differ from quantitative studies in focus, typically observing how immigrants describe their experiences adjusting to American culture and the English language (e.g. Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2002; Zhou & Bankston, 1998). While these studies produce mixed and sometimes contradictory results, almost all mention one significant aspect of the migration experience: the effect of language differences on immigrant parental authority.

In many cultures around the world, families are organized under the leadership of parents and grandparents who are experienced and knowledgeable members of their local dominant culture. These adults are typically responsible for educating and socializing their children. When a family stays

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within a particular culture and language for generations, this model is maintained fairly well. However, this pattern can be undermined or fundamentally shifted when a family uproots themselves to settle in a new country with a new language and culture (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2002). Migration usually results in a language divide between immigrant parents and their children, as children generally assimilate faster into both the new language and the new culture (Phinney, Romero, Nava, & Huang, 2001). The immigrant family structure may change as a result of that linguistic shift. This literature review focuses on understanding how those changes specifically affect the immigrant parents' authority over their adolescent children.

Although many gaps remain in the research on this subject, current literature suggests that language differences between immigrant parents and adolescent children negatively impact the perception of parental authority. The centrality of language itself in both social and cognitive processes provides a foundation for this argument. Further, these impacts can be seen through the eyes of both the parents and the children: first, when parents fail to master the new language, they may experience a degradation of social status, intellectual leadership, and social reliability, which lowers their self-perception of parental

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authority. Second, as adolescents master the new language, they may experience a shift in ethnic identity, familial responsibility, and social independence that lowers their perception of parental authority.

Language: The Shaper of Self and Society

In order to understand how language can affect the authority structure within the immigrant home, it is important to first establish how great an influence language has on the daily life of every human being. Language is key to social interaction, order, and solidarity (Giles, Bourhis, & Taylor, 1977). If people want to communicate complex needs and work together, coherent language is required. Language also helps determine ethnic identity, which is one's personal sense of belonging to an ethnic group and possession of feelings and attitudes associated with that membership (Hurtado & Gurin, 1987; Phinney et al., 2001).

Within ethnic groups, distinct language is used as a symbol of identity and culture, as well as a mechanism for transmitting group feeling and differentiating between group members and outsiders (Giles et al., 1977).

While it is unlikely that language is the sole shaper of an individual's social ties or ethnic identity, it is clearly a significant

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factor in the development of those characteristics. This has serious ramifications for immigrant families, who often experience a notable shift in language and culture between generations (Roche et al., 2015). If language has such a significant influence on how people think, both about themselves and their community, what happens when an immigrant parent begins raising a child in a new country with a new language? Will the adolescent immigrant become fundamentally different and disconnected from his or her parents, simply by growing up thinking in a different language? Both quantitative research and case studies suggest that this is a possibility (Phinney et al., 2001; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2002), and that the immigrant parents' authority is at the heart of the process.

Immigrant Parents' Degradation of Authority

Upon arrival in the United States, immigrant parents and their children are placed into very different social environments that divide them linguistically and affect the speed of their acculturation. Typically, immigrant adolescents come in contact with the dominant culture and language much sooner through immediate enrollment in schools, while parents must adapt to the new economic system by quickly finding jobs,

LANGUAGEANDIMMIGRANTPARENTALAUTHORITY usually with other immigrants (Nguyen, 2008; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2002). Because of this dramatic difference in social environments, immigrant parents are typically much slower to learn the new dominant language than their children. This delay degrades parents' authority by lowering their social status, excluding them from their adolescent children's academic endeavors, and turning the shared hierarchy of social expertise upside-down.

Language's Effect on Parental Employment and Social Status

Language deficits primarily affect immigrant parents' social status through the jobs they are forced to take upon entering the country. Often they can only find work with other immigrants in factories or farms doing manual, unskilled labor; these jobs offer low wages in fields potentially unfamiliar to immigrants, who must accept the associated drop in status in order to help their families survive (Zhou & Bankston, 1998). In *Children of Immigration*, Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco (2002) describe the case study of a man who moved from a position in the upper levels of Mexican political power to scrounging for jobs in San Diego as a busboy, bakery truck driver, and eventually a bowling alley attendant, settling on the latter because he was

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“the most erudite man there” (p.76). This story is typical of immigrants today, whose low-skilled factory or service sector jobs do not provide sufficient pay, insurance, or upward mobility for their families (Brubaker, 2001). While some immigrants arrive with little training or education, others have professional credentials and experience (Zhou, 1997). Lacking a functioning knowledge of English or acceptable American credentials makes it difficult for these immigrant parents to rise from menial labor to the professions they were trained for in their home country. Depending on their ages, these parents’ adolescent children may become cognizant of this social restructuring and begin to doubt the validity of their parents’ skills (Zhou & Bankston, 1998). Without gaining basic proficiency in English, the parents have few resources to change this situation. As a consequence, these immigrant parents may be left with a sense of disorientation in their role as financial providers, as well as sense of frustrated potential.

Parents’ Loss of Intellectual Leadership

In addition to social status, parental authority is tied closely to the “intellectual leadership” that a typical parent wields over his or her children. By previously passing through the schools and

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curriculum their children will face, parents and grandparents acquire a “map of experience,” which they can use to guide their children through school (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2002). For immigrant parents, however, this model of intellectual leadership can be difficult to achieve in a new country, mostly because the language gap keeps them from understanding their children’s academic world.

Researchers often operationally define a parent’s intellectual leadership simply as being able to help his/her child with homework, which studies show to be very important. Rumbaut (1994) studied a sample of over 5,000 immigrant children in San Diego and Miami, discovering that parent-child conflicts were significantly less likely to occur in homes where the parents or siblings were available to help with homework. Other studies of distressed urban school districts agree, asserting that immigrant parents’ inability to involve themselves in their children’s schoolwork may compound all the acculturation difficulties the adolescents already face (Boutakidis, Guerra, & Soriano, 2006). Whereas in the home country parents would be up-to-date on the progress of their children in school, immigrant parents are sometimes deceived when their English-fluent children mistranslate or mislead them while discussing

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grades and assignments (Boutakidis et al., 2006; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2002). If the immigrant parents are able to communicate somewhat effectively in a parent-teacher conference, they receive first-hand information they can use to praise or punish their child. However, this is often not the case. Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco (2002) describe an incident, among others, in which an adolescent used his parents' ignorance of American grading policy to pass off an "F" (failing grade) as "Fabulous." Though extreme, this example demonstrates how immigrant parents can lose their intellectual authority because of a language barrier with their children.

Immigrant Parents' Social Reliance on their Children

Outside of the academic world of their children, immigrant parents may experience degraded authority as they rely on their children to broker in social situations. Social expertise is another element of the "map of experience" that helps parents establish authority. While in many subsets of American culture the stereotype of teenagers is an ambivalence towards family and rejection of authority, immigrant families may come from cultures where this is not the norm (Zhou, 1997). Thus, as immigrant parents watch their children learn English and

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become Americanized faster than they can keep up, they enter unknown social territory. They may fear that their children will leave them, assimilating to American culture and abandoning their roots (Zhou, 1997). However, the immigrant parents must still rely on their children for social brokering. As Lan Cao, a Vietnamese refugee who immigrated as a child with his mother, wrote, "I was the one who told my mother what was acceptable and unacceptable behavior" (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2002, p. 75). A parent in this situation is experiencing a combination of apprehension for the future and dependence in the present that, while difficult to quantify, is probably opposed to their self-perception of authority.

One well-documented and controversial example of the immigrant parent's social dependence is found in the practice of language brokering, in which the adolescent translates a document or social situation for his or her parents. Language brokering is useful for researchers because it permits immigrant parents' reliance on their children to be quantifiably assessed. However, psychologists debate whether this unique interaction helps or harms the adolescents' perception of parental authority, and studies have found evidence for both sides (Chao, 2006; cf. Weisskirch & Alva, 2002). In their introduction on language

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brokering and parent-child relationships, Roche et al. (2015) cite examples of research which assert that language brokering 1) promotes positive parent-child closeness, 2) has no influence on the parent-child relationship, and 3) decreases parental authority by “adultifying” youth (p. 78). These assertions contradict each other, but analysis of the literature shows that studies with quantitative measurement of variables favor the first two conclusions, while qualitative research and case studies support the third (Cervantes & Cordova, 2011; Weisskirch & Alva, 2002). Results from both approaches may be valid, and the effects of language brokering may be too culture- and context-specific to warrant generalizations to immigrants as a whole. While additional research is needed to substantiate this claim, logic and case studies suggest that language brokering reverses the typical authority structure in the immigrant family, conferring dependency on the parent and authority on the child.

Immigrant Adolescents’ Shift in Perception of Parental Authority

It is important to consider the perspective of adolescents, in addition to parents, when discussing the effects of linguistic shifts

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on immigrant families and their authority structures. Just as not being able to speak the dominant language may cause changes in immigrant parents' self-perception of authority, status, and leadership, adolescents who observe these shifts in their parents may have altered perceptions of parental authority, familial responsibility, and social independence.

The Influence of Ethnic Identity in Adolescent Perception of Authority

As highlighted earlier, ethnic identity is a crucial cultural element for many people, and language is a strong determining factor for that identity (Phinney et al., 2001). Many studies highlight the strong correlation between the ability to read and write in a language and ethnic identity as a member of the group that espouses that language (Bankston & Zhou, 1995; Mann, 2004; Phinney et al., 2001). This correlation appears to exist across different cultures and languages, suggesting that the languages which an immigrant retains or learns will largely determine which ethnic communities the individual will have access to (Phinney et al., 2001). This has several implications for how adolescents perceive their parents' authority.

There are social advantages to maintaining ethnic

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identity through language which may stabilize parental authority. The degree to which immigrant adolescents retain or lose their mother tongue determines how much “social capital” they have with their native culture (Zhou, 1997). For example, if a Mexican adolescent immigrant maintains her Spanish, along with a sense of the social rules of the older Mexican generation, she will also keep her access to support and control from her non-English speaking parents and membership in their ethnic communities. Bankston and Zhou (1995) posit that advanced ethnic language abilities bind immigrant children more closely to their traditions, their families, and communities that instill the values of academic achievement. If these adolescents maintain the same ethnic identity and language as their parents, they may be more likely to respect parental authority within that identity as it takes new forms in a new country.

However, the opposite of this positive trend often occurs, as immigrant adolescents migrate to the United States, learn English quickly, and shift to an Americanized ethnic identity. Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2002) explain this shift through the experience of Esmeralda, who immigrated from a Spanish-speaking country to the U.S. as an adolescent. She describes that as her and her siblings English vocabularies grew,

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they began to form a bond between them which excluded their mother and grandmother. The older women could only watch with worry as the children adopted an ethnic identity which was unavailable to them. This ethnic separation is especially evident in cases of “relayed” or “serial” migration, in which members of an immigrant family arrive in a new country at different times. The children that arrive first have more time to develop an American ethnic authenticity, which distinguishes them from the family members that arrive later. This disparity strains perceptions of parental authority and relationships between serially migrating siblings (Zhou, 1997). There are numerous contextual factors that influence whether an adolescent will take the former approach and retain a stake in the native ethnic identity, or the latter and separate themselves along generation lines (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996). However, in preserving parental authority, the key seems to be simply a consonant approach to acculturation between immigrant parents and their children — both acculturate at the same time, both remain unacculturated, or both agree on selective acculturation. When generations disagree on this approach, parental authority suffers.

Increased Familial Responsibility Creates Unstable Authority Structures

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As adolescent immigrants push far ahead of their parents in mastery of the new language, they inherit a gradually increasing responsibility for the success and acculturation of the family. This is evident in the aforementioned process of language brokering, in which children are given a role filled with unsolicited power that they may not be cognitively or linguistically prepared for (Weisskirch & Alva, 2002). It must be noted that an adolescent with English ability may be seen as a great asset by his or her parents, which could be a beneficial interchange. Some studies demonstrate an increase in parent-child closeness associated with frequent language brokering for certain immigrant populations (Roche et al., 2015; Dorner, Orellana, & Jimenez, 2008). However, qualitative studies show that an adolescent can be very close to a parent and simultaneously feel that that parent has lost their decision-making authority, which means that parental authority structures may suffer even when parent-child closeness does not. As Lan Cao described this phenomenon in his own life, "I would have to forgo the luxury of adolescent experiments and temper tantrums, so that I could scoop my mother out of harm's way and give her sanctuary" (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2002, p. 75). Interestingly, this situation seems to illustrate that Cao's increased authority

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led to greater closeness, but it also led to lower perception of parental authority. As adolescents like Cao begin to take over decisions regarding what is culturally “safe” or appropriate for the family to do, they perceive that their parents no longer hold the same degree of authority that was instinctive in the home country.

When adolescents take on this new level of familial responsibility, they may experience a variety of negative effects. Immigrant parents must struggle with acculturation stress alongside their children, which means that they are unavailable to help their adolescents cope with cultural conflicts (Ainslie, Tummala-Narra, Harlem, Barbanel, & Ruth, 2013). This could confer a sense of independence on adolescents, but also may force them to follow their own best cultural judgment at an impressionable age. Additionally, adolescents may be exposed to family secrets while translating in medical or legal situations, creating disillusionment or anxiety (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2002). Finally, acculturation “stressor events” often precede mental health problems, but adolescent immigrants may have to face these experiences without much parental guidance (Cervantes, Fisher, Córdova, & Napper, 2012). These risks may undermine the adolescents’ perception of parental

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authority.

Increased Adolescent Independence and Social Equality with Parents

Upon entering the United States, immigrants often find an adolescent culture which focuses on peer relationships rather than family ties and independence rather than familial roles. This culture of independence encourages adolescent immigrants to separate themselves from their families, but as just described, immigration also bestows a great weight of family responsibility upon them; this dichotomy can be a large source of stress (Weisskirch & Alva, 2002). Interestingly, Roche et al. (2015) found that immigrant parents reported no higher level of disagreements with their children when the children brokered for them more frequently. However, their children did report more disagreements. This highlights how adolescent acculturation could cause differences in perceived intergenerational conflict. As immigrant adolescents encounter the American youth culture, they may have to choose between adopting a stronger peer orientation and lower respect for authority or staying family-oriented and respectful of authority (Zhou, 1997). This decision is hard to make for many non-immigrant American

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youth, whose parents already have command of the language and understanding of the culture; for adolescent immigrants, language barriers and cultural dissonance with parents only compound the difficulty. If an immigrant family comes from a culture that values deep-seated family ties, the younger family members may experience anxiety that those ties will keep them from becoming “American,” and therefore may seek independence from them. However, with research asserting the importance of ethnic identity within the home (Bankston & Zhou, 1995; Phinney et al., 2001), there is an implication that these adolescents would benefit more by avoiding total assimilation to the American youth culture.

Conclusion

The results of decreased parental authority in immigrant families may be more damaging in some contexts than in others. Specifically, research demonstrates that parental authority and knowledge safeguards adolescents most when it is applied to their choices of safety and well-being, rather than the choices that fall within the adolescents’ “personal jurisdiction” like clothing and grooming (Roche et al., 2015; Smetana, 1995).

While this assertion may seem obvious, it has serious rami-

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fications. It means that parents are most effective when they have authority over behaviors like whom their children hang out with, what they do with unsupervised time, and how they do their schoolwork. For immigrant parents with language barriers, these important areas of authority are often the ones that suffer most. Lack of English ability means that immigrant parents take lower paying jobs, often multiple ones which take them away from home when their kids are out of school. Consequently, they have much less influence over the adolescents' unsupervised time, and less awareness of whom they spend that time with. Language barriers make immigrant parents unequipped to help with schoolwork or communicate with teachers, two practices that have numerous protective benefits for adolescents. When these difficulties are joined with decreased social status, acculturation stress, and turbulent ethnic identities, the immigrant parent's authority over their adolescent children must logically suffer.

However, the solution to these problems is not so simple as to instruct parents to learn English. In fact, studies that point out the problems associated with parental language barriers also provide exciting possibilities to help these immigrant families. This review demonstrated how ethnic identities and bilingual-

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ism can provide a support system and establish high expectations for adolescent success, especially in academics (Rumbaut, 1994). If youth can maintain positive connections in the native and the new culture, their high expectations may enable them to outstrip the students of even the dominant culture in academic achievement (Bankston & Zhou, 1995). Further, it has been demonstrated that a key to cohesion for immigrant families is open communication about how they will acculturate, whether that means remaining unacculturated or acculturating at the same rate (Zhou, 1997). If parents and children set expectations for how they will adapt together to their new country, they may be able to create a climate where each is useful to the other. Society at large can assist by helping immigrant families understand these potential difficulties when they arrive and by providing adequate multilingual services in school and work.

In summary, the reviewed literature on immigrant families supports the assertion that language barriers undermine immigrant parental authority. From the perspective of parents, lowered social status and employment level, as well as inability to assist with homework and social reliance on children, combine to decrease self-perception of authority. For adolescent immigrants, faster linguistic acculturation may affect

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their perception of parental authority by altering their ethnic identity, increasing their familial responsibility, and changing their attitudes toward intergenerational relationships. However, there are gaps in the literature that offer directions for future research. It is unclear whether practices like language brokering undermine or bolster immigrant parental authority because the current literature does not separate authority from closeness with parents, which are likely two distinct constructs. Also, while this literature review suggests some results of decreased immigrant parental authority, more research is needed into its potential long-term consequences on family structure and the mental health of parents and children. Finally, the development of educational strategies and interventions could benefit many immigrant families, especially if implemented early in the acculturation process.

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