Waiting for Your Return: A Phenomenological Study on Parental Deportation and the Impact of the Family and the Parent-Child Attachment Bond

Erika Beckles Flores
Syracuse University

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Abstract

In 2007 it was estimated that 500,000 Latino immigrants entered the U.S. illegally and are now at risk of being deported back to their country of origin. Children of deported Latino immigrants typically stay in the U.S. separated from their deported parent(s). Previous research has focused on parent-child separation when Latino parents immigrate to the U.S. and leave their children behind in their country of origin. While some of the literature has focused on attachment bonds on Latinos, to date none has focused on parent-child separation related to deportation and its impact on the attachment bond. This study used a qualitative methodological approach guided by phenomenology to explore the experiences of children of deported parents. Participants were over the age of 20 (ages ranged from 23-36 years with a mean age of 29), of Latino descent, and were able to vividly recall the experience of having an undocumented parent deported during childhood. Ten participants took part in the study and each responded to an in-depth semi-structured interview. Study results confirmed previous research detailing the impact of separation on the family. The experiences of loss and separation indicated that family and parent-child attachment bonds are uniquely impacted by parent-child separation through deportation. This caused immediate and long-term effects on self, the parent, and the family. Unmitigated by sufficiently developed coping skills, the intense stress caused by the experience left children at risk for feeling isolated, abandoned, hopeless, angry, and scared. The results of this study suggested that the parent-child attachment bond is flexible and impacted by relational interactions and experiences. Implications for marriage and family therapists serving Latino immigrant families dealing with parent-child separation related to deportation are discussed for future research.
WAITING FOR YOUR RETURN: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON PARENTAL DEPORTATION AND THE IMPACT ON THE FAMILY AND THE PARENT CHILD ATTACHMENT BOND

By

Erika Carmen Beckles Flores
B.A. California State University San Marcos, 2004
M.A. Alliant International University, 2006

DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Marriage and Family Therapy in the Graduate School of Syracuse University

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

It was during a conversation I was having with my parents about getting good grades that I learned that my family was from Panama. In our talk, my father told me that I should do well in school because of all the opportunities available in the United States (U.S.). Further, in the same conversation, my parents referred to us as “Panamanians” and to me as a “first generation U.S.-born American citizen.” These titles and terms were awkward initially, but with time I wore them with pride.

In the fifth grade, about 20 students and I were taken out of the classroom for what I have come to learn was an English proficiency test. I was asked to write, spell, and produce complete sentences for a series of questions. After the assessment we were sent back to our classroom, but by the following week more than half of us (some of whom were my closest friends) were removed from the class without explanation and placed in the English as a Second Language (ESL) academic program. Those students may as well have been assigned to another school because I did not see most of them again until high school.

I share this story because I believe it was at this point that I began to realize that these experiences were unique to children that come from immigrant families. As I started to make sense of the world bigger than myself and my community I remember witnessing a theme around being undocumented. Whether it was in reference to a peer’s English competency, their SES, or accessibility to resources the issue of documentation seem to always be a theme. Living in a city in Southern California with a large Latino
population I was able to be exposed to a reality that hinted to various experiences that children lived when their parents are undocumented.

I quickly started to understand that there were topics, issues, and stressors that impacted my American friends (African American or White) and my Latino/a friend (of Latino decent) differently. My American friends would trust me with secrets such as who they had a crush on at school, that their mother had lost her job, or that they had smoked pot before class. My Latino/a friends, on the other hand, would share that they had entered California illegally when they were seven or eight, that their parents had paid the coyotes (human smugglers) $5,000 to bring their sisters, cousins, or uncles to the U. S., or the worst of all, that their mother, father, or brothers had been caught by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents and were being deported back to their home country.

During my teen years I did not know how to be helpful when my Latino friends would share these types of secrets with me. Each story was similar but never the same as the one before. After having their parents deported some of my friends moved in with a relative, some dropped out of school and started working to support younger siblings for fear of being separated in foster care, and others ended up on the streets, deported themselves, or were never heard from again.

Also, many times, the deportation of a primary caregiver (mother or father) resulted in the family relocating or moving back to their country of origin. But there were other times when the deportation of a parent was just a part of the process of being undocumented in the U.S. Some friends who had their mothers or fathers deported while in middle school would tell me in high school, with different levels of excitement, that their parents had returned. There was no uniformity among my friends’ responses to their
parents’ return. Some appeared angry at their mother or father for leaving but were not able to voice why, others took on a more anxious/altruistic stance towards their parents, and there were a few that acted like they did not care either way.

As I got older, I heard these stories from my Latino/a friends and clients over and over again. Eventually I became curious about my own family’s journey to the U.S. and asked my parents how they came here. My parents shared that they met and married in the Republica de Panama in the 1970s. A year later my mother gave birth to my oldest brother, Raymond Jr. Shortly after his birth, my parents planned to migrate to the U.S. They applied for a visa, came here, and ultimately overstayed their visit with the plan to send for Raymond Jr. when it was safe. They both shared that things were “a little stressful” to say the least. My mother stated that with God’s grace they were able to get into the process of citizenship. My father joined the military and was able to go back to Panama and bring my brother to the U.S. They both admit that it took a little longer than they had anticipated, but they eventually felt that they were living their dream. By the time I was born my parents had been American citizens for more than ten years and for the most part growing up I experienced a fairly typical middle class, military family lifestyle.

Hearing about my parents’ journey from Panama to the U.S. helped me understand who I was as a young Central American girl growing up in a predominately Mexican community. These were helpful to me because it gave me some context about how my culture was similar and also different from the Mexican culture. Although during my youth I struggled with being seen as a black Central American by Mexican and American peers. I have asked my parents to share their story of immigration countless
times and each time they have shared something new about their excitements, their fears, their regrets, and their innocence. It has been through their personal sharing, the stories of other relatives, and my experience as a child of a parent who was unexpectedly deployed for months to a year at a time that I have not only developed some understanding of but also some personal reference to immigration and separation. I understand that my parents’ immigration story and my experience as a child in a military family are unique and different from the stories I have heard from my friends, family members, and clients. However, it has been all of these stories, experiences and the relationships behind them that have moved me from reading about Latino/as and immigration to contributing towards social change by using my passion as a family therapist and my training as a researcher to bring voice to lives and families impacted by deportation.

**Description of the Problem**

There have been several studies on the impact of immigration on Latino/a families (child, parent, and/or family as a whole) living in the U.S. (Cabassa, Zayas, & Hansen, 2006; Grzywacz, Arcury, Marin, Carrillo, Burke, Coates & Quandt, 2007; Hiott, Grzywacz, Arcury, Quandt, 2006; Romero, Hondagneu-Sotelo, & Ortiz, 1997; Mitrani, Santisteban, & Muir, 2004). Researchers have explored hardships on the family unit upon arrival to the U.S. (e.g., poverty, a new language, a new identity, living in America undocumented, etc; Beck & Schur, 2000; Bedolla, 2003; Dawson & Williams, 2008; South, Crowder & Chavez, 2005; Tobar, 2008 Palinkas & Arciniega, 1999). There are more recent articles that have started to explore immigration related parent child separation (Mitrani et al., 2004; Mena, Mirani, Mason, Muir, & Santisteban, 2008); however, I have been unable to find any articles that explore how a period of separation
through deportation impacts families and particularly the parent-child relationship when the child is left in the U.S.

In regards to Latino family and migration the literature has given significant attention to issues of pathology (e.g., links between stresses of migration experience in association to depression, marital conflict, crisis of identity, education, immigration adult identity development; Ainslie, 1998; Artico, 2003; Arrendondo-Dowd, 1980; Grinberg & Grinberg, 1989; Sluzki, 1979; Suarez-Orozco, 2000; Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2003; Caplan, 2007; Miranda, Siddique, Der-Mario, & Berlin, 2005).

Artico’s (2003) study is an example of another body of literature that has explored the impact of immigration on the parent-child relationship when the parent left the child in their Latin American country of origin and the parents relocated to the United States. In particular, Artico interviewed 34 adolescents that were separated from their biological parents for a period of time while their parents migrated to the U.S. with the hope to seek employment. Many of the children interviewed spoke about having very mixed feelings about their parents’ departure to the U.S. The feelings included a sense of pride, an understanding that their parents were in the U.S. to provide a better living, and feelings of loss and/or abandonment (Artico, 2003).

Artico’s study supported the theoretical assertion that separation is a complex and multifaceted experience. Also, it is typically accompanied by loss, grief, anxiety, uncertainty, expectations, and a whole range of feelings that change as meaning is made throughout the process. In addition, he explored the role that parent-child separation played in the development of the parent-child attachment bond. In regards to parent-child separation and reunification, studies have indicated that there are critical stages during
the separation and reunification phase that are vital in reducing the negative and long
term impact on the parent-child attachment bond (Bowlby, 1988; Haight, Kagle & Black,
2003). There are many studies that stress children’s resilience and their capabilities of
dealing with stressors like separation (McCurdy & Scherman, 1996; Miller, 2007).
However, I have been unable to locate any other studies that have concluded with
findings that suggest that there are short and long time effects in parent-child separation
that impact the parent-child attachment bond (Bowlby, 1988; Rusby & Tasker, 2008).
One very recent study indicated that consistency in an adolescent’s environment was so
critical that adolescents who moved more than 3 times were more than twice likely to
attempt suicide (Qin, Mortensen, & Pedersen, 2009). In addition to frequency of
relocation, other researchers (Adam & Chase-Lansdale, 2002) have shared that the time
of notice regarding the move separation or move greatly impacted the child’s response to
the separation or relocation. Research on parent-child separation has been explored in the
field for decades. However, some of the challenges in applying some of the theory that
has been developed to other types of separation are that much of the parent-child
separation research has been primarily developed out of literature on divorce (Amato &
Keith, 1991; Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994).

In my clinical work, I have listened to stories that have never been told before. I
have had conversations with families about the impact of their separation and the ways in
which that relational support could act as a source of healing. However, what I did not
tell these families was that there were families all around the world and the U.S. that were
going through a similar experience. Because I lacked the knowledge within the research I
was unable to address another feeling that they had behind the separation which was the
feeling of victimization (i.e., like they were the only ones or one of the few that were experiencing parent-child separation through deportation).

However, during the last ten years there has been a migration shift and there are more families entering the United States illegally than estimated in previous years (U.S. Census, 2004). Some analysts have suggested that this shift from one undocumented citizen entering the country to the entire family or multiple family members entering the United States illegally has been due to the poor border security, specifically the Mexican and U.S. border (U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service [INS], 2008). While others suggest (often the position of many human rights organizations) that the increase of families entering the U.S. together or in part illegally is a reflection of people wanting and willing to do whatever it takes to have the right to raise their families in a safe community. Regardless of the reason, the reality is that there are more than three million children living in the United States that are a part of a family where one or more of their parents are in the U.S. illegally (Hoefer, Rytina, & Campbell, 2007).

We are living in a time in our society where there are pressures to ‘do something’ about undocumented immigrants living in the United States. There are varying opinions and some believe solutions lie in immigration reform, a presidential pardon, an increase of mass raids to deport illegal immigrants or new government policies that make it incredibly difficult for illegal immigrants to make a living in the U.S. Regardless of where the U.S. is moving politically on this issue, there will be millions of lives affected by the changes and new policies that lie ahead during the following years.

Because this topic truly captures an issue of the times, it has been important for me to thoroughly explore the issue beyond the knowledge of my personal experiences.
Without taking on such a challenge I believe that I would lack the words and knowledge to address some of the multifaceted issues related to relational separation. Consequently, I believe that the appropriate focus on this dissertation will be on gaining an understanding of the impact of deportation on Latino Families. More specifically, I am interested in the impacts of the retrospective reports of parental deportation and how it impacted the parent-child relationship from the perspective of the child.

**Need for the Study**

Thanks to decades of meaningful theoretical and clinical contributions to attachment theory, specifically within the parent-child bond and parent-child separation, there is a significant amount of agreement in shared experiences, their implications and some of the relational work that is vital to maintaining a (secure) healthy parent-child bond (Bowlby, 1988). In addition, multiple scholars acknowledge the ways that underlying issues such as perception, stress, loss, expectations, grief and psychopathology play a part during the separation, reunification, and ultimately the development of the parent-child bond (Bowlby, 1988; Robertson & Bowlby, 1952; Mitrani et al., 2004). Other studies highlight the importance of parents developing stability, reassurance, and security after a separation (Kim & Yeary, 2003; Perez Foster, 2001). However, one aspect of literature that I have been unable to find is the central focus in this document, which is the impact on the parent-child relationship when the dyad experiences separation and reunification related to an undocumented parents deportation while the child is left in the U.S.

This unique topic is important to explore as previous studies on parent-child separation have shown that separations that are for long periods of time and with little
notice tend to have a significant negative effect on the parent-child attachment (Bowlby, 1988; Woodward, Fergusson, & Belsky, 2000; Mitrani et al., 2004). Additionally, other studies have shown that the responsiveness and accessibility of a parent to a child can act as a significant and powerful first step towards healing a relationship that might have been fractured due to separation or neglect (Johnson & Whiffen, 2003).

While a great deal of studies have explored Latino immigrant families living in the U.S. and the many ways that families are shaped by the immigration process, I have found no studies that captured the adolescents experience of being separated and reunited from a parent through deportation. Likewise, I have been unable to find any studies that focus on the impact of deportation on the family. Possibly because deportation is such a zeitgeist, the literature provides a more thorough review of immigration but has only just begun to describe some of the many phenomena that are associated with deportation and family dynamics. An examination of children of undocumented Latino/a parents and experiences of the separation and reunification through deportation could serve as a contribution that would impact family therapy theory and practice. Likewise, family therapy theories could gain an understanding of current and complex issues that are impacting many families. Empirical findings could help clinicians provide support to families to help them make meaning, cope and heal from the multilayered process of separation and reunification through deportation.

In this dissertation, I aim to uncover an understanding of the impact on the parent-child relationship when a child is left behind in the U.S. and their undocumented parent is separated from their child through deportation and later reunited when the undocumented parent returns to the U.S. I will be guided by the following grand tour questions:
1. How did you experience your family’s experience of deportation?

2. How do you think the experience of separation and reunification through deportation impacted your relationship between you and your parent?

**Overview of the Study**

Children living in the U.S. with undocumented parents often live with varying levels of fear and anxiety that their parents will be caught and deported. Research supports that the more notice and information a child is given regarding a parent-child separation, the better the child will cope with the separation. Also, with greater notice, there is less likelihood that the parent-child bond will be significantly injured. However, I was unable to find a detailed exploration of the experience of separation in Latino families of undocumented parents in the U.S. This dissertation acts as a platform that reveals the rich description of children’s lived experiences of parent-child separation in order to impact clinical practices. The complexity of this examination can act as a guide for clinicians in supporting children that have gone through this type of loss and in helping parents that might not know how to weave themselves back into their children’s lives.
CHAPTER 2

Review of Literature

This section explores the theoretical framework, attachment theory, that guides this research study. This section will also provide an overview of attachment theory and the ways that it explores the parent-child bond. Throughout this chapter, information about Latino families will be explored because there is significantly more research available on Latino families in general than on Latinos, deportation, and attachment in particular. Latino families will be explored in general, with specific focus on immigrant Latino families living in the U.S. Also, the implications and impact of deportation, immigration, separation, and loss on Latino families will be explored with a specific emphasis on the parent-child relationship and the perspectives of parents and children.

Theoretical Framework

“No parent is going to provide a secure base for his growing child unless he has an intuitive understanding of and respect for his child’s attachment behavior and treats it as the intrinsic and valuable part of human nature I believe it to be.”

- John Bowlby (1988, p. 12)

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory is a comprehensive approach that addresses issues from a variety of perspectives, including physiological, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral. Within attachment theory, attachment styles and attachment orientation are used interchangeably and refer to stable, global, individual differences in 1) tendencies to seek and experience comfort and emotional support from persons with whom one has an
attachment bond and 2) presumptions about the responsiveness of attachment figures to bids for comfort and support (Rholes & Simpson, 2004).

Attachment theory provides a framework for understanding not only emotional reactions among infants, but also love, loneliness, and grief in adults (Johnson & Whiffen, 2003). The development of infant attachment to the parent and the way those infants explore other systems are central to attachment theory (Elliot & Reis, 2003). Within attachment theory, an infant will first establish a strong attachment to its primary caregiver, who will be the infant’s base of exploration. It is an infant’s innate behavior to want to explore new things, but when a child reaches away to explore and becomes scared or encounters danger, the primary caregiver will be its secure protection base (Ainsworth et al., 1978). If the parent is accessible and responsive to the infant during distress, there will be joy and a sense of security developed within the parent-child attachment. However, if that security is threatened natural reactions are jealousy, anxiety, and anger. If the attachment is broken, the infant may experience grief and depression (Ainsworth, et al.; Bowlby, 1979, 1988; Noppe, 2000).

The first few hours of an infant’s life are an important and critical time for mother and infant to initiate and develop an attachment bond (Klaus, Kennell & Klaus, 1995). The mother can foster this bond by holding, stroking, kissing, talking to, and breastfeeding the newborn (Kaye, 1977; Klaus, Kennell & Klaus, 1995). As the infant grows from days to several years old, he or she begins to develop an attachment to the parent that is consistent with the interactions that he or she has had with the parent. As mentioned previously, an attachment style reflects a relational interaction; therefore, a
child’s attachment style is also contingent on the primary caregiver’s ability to create a secure environment.

Whether good or bad, the behaviors that form an infant’s or child’s attachment style are contributed in part to his or her experiences. A number of studies (Klaus, et al., 1975; Robson & Kumar, 1980; Kaye, 1977; Collis & Schaffer, 1975; Dinero, Conger, Shaver, Widaman, & Larsen-Rife, 2008) have suggested that family of origin contributes to the development of a child’s relational attachment style. Likewise, Bowlby’s (1940) early theoretical and clinical interest in the intergenerational transmission of attachment relations also suggested that previous generational trauma and issues contributed to parental emotional availability, thus impacting the parent-child relational attachment style.

**Roles of mother and fathers: Similarities and differences.** The origins of attachment theory lie in the observations and reports of the mother-infant relationship (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1953). Research has identified the importance of the mother-infant bond and how early it begins to form. However, it was not until 1981 that Main and Weston extended the observation of the parent-child relationship to include fathers. In their study, they observed 60 infants first with one parent, and then with the other 6 months later. Their findings revealed that when paired into groups, the father-infant attachment bond process closely resembled the mother-infant process with nearly the same percentage distribution of patterns. Also, infants that were securely attached to both parents were more adjusted overall. Secure attachment with just one parent resulted in less adjustment and no attachment bond with either parent resulted in infants that were
insecure, less likely to explore their environment, and less likely to seek comfort from either parent.

Attachment styles are the product of many experiences, including relational and transgenerational transmissions. Because of this, attachment styles are multifaceted and ever-developing. Attachment bonds are best understood when viewed as processes that unfold over time and are manifested at multiple levels, including behavioral, cognitive, physiological, and emotional (Rholes & Simpson, 2004). Consideration of these factors adds depth and complexity to the theory and provides clinicians with additional useful information to assist parents in helping themselves and in improving their relationships with their children (Bowlby, 1988). In some of Bowlby’s early clinical and theoretical work, he noted that many parents who processed some of their own grief and trauma were observed and reported to experience different attachment interactions with their emotionally disturbed children (Bowlby, 1940).

Attachment theory does not discount the individual and unique differences that contribute to human development and the type of relationships that people have in their lives. In fact, attachment theory values multiple levels of information, experience, and interaction. Because of this, attachment theory is considered a working model as the theory remains open to correction and revision. Similar to scientific theories, working models permit people to formulate expectations, develop hypotheses, and create explanations for relational outcomes. Working models organize “behavior, cognition, and affect in close relationships, providing guidance about how to behave, what should be expected or anticipated, and how to interpret the meaning of ambiguous interpersonal events” (Rholes & Simpson, 2004, p. 7).
As Bowlby (1980) stated, working models should be fairly accurate reflections of the experiences individuals share with their attachment figures. Attachment theory is a fluid approach that uses the essence of working models to be situated at the crossroad of existing premises and new information and experiences (Collins & Read, 1994; Rholes & Simpson, 2004). Because attachment theory is a working model, it operates at the intersection of past experiences, new experiences, and revised understandings of the past.

Within attachment theory there are self-report measures that identify four attachment categories: secure, anxious, dismissive-avoidant, and fearful-avoidant. There are also two continuous dimensions, often labeled “avoidance” and “anxiety” (or “ambivalence”), which define a two-dimensional space that underlies these categories (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). Each of these categories reflects the relationship between infants and their primary caregivers, rather than simply the characteristics of the infant. Thus, it is technically incorrect to label an infant or child secure, avoidant, or anxious avoidant (Rholes & Simpson, 2004). A brief review of each relational characteristic provides a more complete illustration of these characteristics and how they are developed.

**Characteristics of secure attachment.** Secure attachment characteristics involve a combination of low avoidance and low anxiety, which may account for why these children do not experience significant distress when separated from caregivers. Initiated contact from the caregiver is accessible and responsive, which is readily accepted by securely attached children. Infants and children that develop secure attachment patterns with the primary caregiver differ from insecure infants in several ways; for example, children with secure attachment bonds do not become exceptionally distressed by a
parent’s absence, although they clearly prefer their parents to a stranger (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Rholes & Simpson, 2004).

Regarding a secure attachment to parents, Weiss (1982) believes that adolescents who exhibit autonomy-seeking behaviors usually have a positive relationship with their parents, indicating that they feel comfortable exploring because they know their parents will be there for them. Additionally, these adolescents are described as less disruptive, less aggressive, and more mature than children with ambivalent attachment styles. When a caregiver reads the child’s verbal and non-verbal cues and reflects them back, the child sees himself or herself through the eyes of the attachment figure (Fonagy, 2001).

**Characteristics of ambivalent attachment.** Children with an ambivalent attachment towards their primary caregivers are often suspicious of strangers and are difficult to soothe once the caregivers return. In a review of literature, Cassidy and Berlin (1994) linked ambivalent-insecure attachment to low maternal availability, which may be associated with why children are not reassured or comforted by the return of a parent/caregiver following a distressing separation. As these children transition to different settings (e.g., school and society at large), they are often thought to be anxious with difficulty exploring independently. Teachers may describe these children as clingy or over-dependent (Cassidy & Berlin, 1994). Ambivalent attachment is just that: ambivalent. Children with ambivalent characteristics display mixed reactions to their mothers (e.g., approach-avoidance behaviors); they remain agitated and fail to resume or begin new activities (Rholes & Simpson, 2004).

**Characteristics of avoidant attachment.** In avoidant attachment, there is no ambiguity. Children with avoidant attachment styles disregard or ignore their mothers.
They show signs of emotional disengagement and withdrawal and engage in behaviors that keep them distracted from the distress they are feeling. Although these children are oftentimes observed to be distant and withdrawn, their behaviors do not necessarily imply malice or that they are less distressed than their peers. In contrast, avoidant attachment behaviors often become even more pronounced following a parental absence. Furthermore, research has suggested that following a separation or reunification, children that display avoidant behavior are distressed by the separation, although they may be reported to appear calm in their defense or coping manner. With avoidant attachment, children might not reject attention from a parent, but neither do they seek out contact or comfort. They show no significant preference between a parent and a complete stranger. A child with an avoidant attachment style can easily be misconstrued as calm or resilient because he or she lacks some of the more observable signs of distress (e.g., crying, seeking consonance, and preference of caregiver over stranger). Some of the less visible distress cues are also overlooked by parents that have a difficult time differentiating a child’s need for reassurance (Bowlby, 2004).

**Characteristics of disorganized attachment.** Disorganized attachment style is the only style that lacks a clearly defined behavior. These children’s reactions and responses to their caregivers tend to range from avoidant to resistant. Adults may describe children with disorganized attachment style as dazed in behavior, confused, or apprehensive in the presence of their caregiver. Some research (Main & Hesse, 1990; Main & Solomon, 1986) has suggested that inconsistent behavior on the parents’ part may contribute to this attachment style. A child’s experience of a parent as someone to alternately fear and receive reassurance from is due to a parental inconsistency that can
contribute to the child’s acquisition of a disorganized attachment style (Main & Hess, 1990).

**Attachment theory and emotion.** Emotions are a central part of attachment theory and the relational bonds that are formed between parents and children: “Many of the most intense emotions arise during the formation, the maintenance, the disruption, and the renewal of attachment relationship” (Bowlby, 1979, p.130). The first volume of Bowlby’s trilogy (1969) focused on the physical proximity of the attachment figure. However, it was apparent by Volume Two that Bowlby had made the connection between experienced emotions and reported or observable attachment bonds. The attachment style developed between the child and the attachment figure is partially determined by the child’s feelings about the attachment figure’s availability or unavailability, which Sroufe (1977) termed felt security.

In the context of attachment theory, emotions shape the relationship between a child and attachment figure. Emotions are inherently multilevel and multi-component processes (Frijda & Mesquita, 1998) that create secure, anxious, or distressing experiences and interactions. However, these interactions are significantly “determined by the accessibility and responsiveness of his [or her] principal attachment figure” (Bowlby, 1973, p.23). Feelings such as anxiety, grief, and mourning are often experienced by children who do not have accessible or responsive attachment figures.

*Separation anxiety* is a natural response to a current threat or some other risk of loss (Bowlby, 1988). Robertson and Bowlby (1952) developed three phases of separation response: *protest* (related to separation anxiety), *despair* (related to grief and mourning), and *denial* or *deattachment* (related to defense mechanisms such as repression;
Bretherton, 1992a). In some cases, an additional emotion such as anger can develop when there are threats of abandonment, specifically in older children and adolescents (Bowlby, 1988). Interestingly enough, a child that feels loved by his or her attachment figure will initially protest the separation but will later develop more self-reliance. Ainsworth’s classification of infant-mother attachment styles supported Bowlby’s theories of how children cope with threats of parental abandonment (Ainsworth, Blehar, Walters, & Wall, 1978).

After the separation has taken place and the anxiety has already set in, the next common emotions are grief and mourning, typical reactions to a loss. Bowlby’s clinical and theoretical work revealed that mourning varied in intensity even in mentally healthy individuals and included “anger, directed at third parties, the self, and sometimes at the person lost, disbelief that the loss has occurred (misleadingly termed denial) and a tendency, often though not always unconscious, to search for the lost person in the hope of reunion” (Bowlby, 1988, p.32). The belief that children are unable to mourn often disrupts a child’s ability to grieve, mourn, cope, and heal.

Grief and mourning are very typical emotional reactions to a perceived or real threat of loss. However, there are instances in which a child shows no sign of seeking comfort, even when a situation would ordinarily activate attachment behavior. During these occasions attachment behaviors are being either temporarily or permanently rendered inactive (Bowlby, 1980). As a result, the entire range of feeling and desire normally experienced at the moment of distress is unavailable. This defensive process inhibits a child’s ability to experience distressing emotions and can potentially replace
these emotions with distracting information. *Defensive processes* are just another way to describe repression (Bowlby, 1980; Bretherton, 1992).

Emotions play an undoubtedly important role in attachment styles and the way that attachment bonds are developed, experienced, and demonstrated. There are, however, cross-cultural variations in social rules regarding emotional display (Ekman & Friesen, 1969; Russell, 1994). Emotions have a physiological component (Cacioppo, Klein, Berntson, & Hatfield, 1993); they are able to reveal a multifaceted volume of information about one’s response to experiences, interactions, and relationships. Because emotions are the building blocks of developing established attachment bonds, it is critical and relevant to continue to explore childhood emotions in relation to primary attachment figures.

**Attachment theory today.** Throughout the years, attachment theory has been used in an effort to make meaning of human relationships and bonds by applying the theory to new areas in the field. Although Bowlby’s work primarily focused on the nature of the infant-mother relationship, he believed that attachment illustrated the human experience from cradle to grave. During the mid 1980s, researchers began to consider that attachment processes could play out into adulthood. Hazan and Shaver (1987) were the first researchers to explore Bowlby’s ideas in the context of romantic relationships. According to Hazan and Shaver, the parental bond that was developed in the child’s youth contained the same processes and emotions that would impact his or her future romantic relationships.

Other researchers and clinicians have developed extended theories that originate from Bowlby’s attachment theory; one in particular is Susan Johnson’s Emotionally
Focused Theory (EFT). Like Bowlby, Johnson believes that individuals in a relationship feel the relationship is a safe haven when their partners are responsive and accessible (Johnson, 2005). Johnson has done attachment behavior research on diverse populations and continues to have findings that suggest that a secure attachment is not only important in a healthy relationship but it is critical (Johnson, 1999).

Cross-cultural studies. There has been a significant amount of research using attachment theory to explore and understand relationships in different groups. One of the first studies was conducted by Ainsworth in Africa; she organized and conducted an observational study on mother-infant interactions called the Ganda Project (Ainsworth, 1967). In the mid 1950s, Ainsworth collected rich data suggesting that securely attached mother-infant relationships correlated significantly with maternal sensitivity. Babies of sensitive mothers were more likely to be securely attached, whereas babies of less sensitive mothers were more likely to be classified as insecure (Ainsworth, 1963). Although it was not until the mid 1960s that these findings were presented, Ainsworth’s work was a huge leap into taking attachment theory to other cultures.

Cross-cultural studies suggest that secure characteristics of attachment in infancy are universally considered the most desirable pattern by mothers (van Ijzendoorn & Sagi, 1999). This was specifically seen in decades of replications of the Strange Situation in different populations. Many of these studies spurred a debate on whether attachment theory was a universal or culture-specific truth.

In a replication of the Strange Situation study conducted in North Germany, Grossmann, Grossmann, Spangler, Suess, and Unzer (1985) reported that the avoidant classifications were overrepresented; however, when similar studies were conducted in
Israel (Sagi, Lamb, Lewkowicz, Shoham, Dvir, & Fates, 1985) and Japan (Miyake, Chen, & Campos, 1985), ambivalent classifications scores were higher than expected. Many of these international studies provided cultural context that helped create a more complex picture of the results. For example, in the Grossmann et al. (1985) study, the researchers shared that the high reports of avoidant scores were not attributed to rejection by German parents but rather to a greater parental push toward infant independence. Likewise, there was a similar cultural component to the studies conducted in Israel (Sagi et al., 1985) and Japan (Miyake et al., 1985).

In addition to analyzing attachment theory classifications to international cultures, van Ijzendoorn and Kroonenberg (1988) examined the frequency distributions of the Strange Situation classifications from over 1,000 U.S. and cross-national studies. Although they collected abundant data, the researchers stressed that valid conclusions about cross-national differences should not be drawn from single samples. The danger of this practice is seen in the Sagi, Lamb, Lewkowicz, Shoham, Dvir and Fates (1985) study, where high reports of ambivalent classifications were attributed to specific nighttime caregiver arrangements. The Sagi et al. (1985) and Grossmann et al. (1985) studies both partially resemble Ainsworth’s Uganda study in that all studied a unique cultural group that added to the interpretation of the data presented.

While several attachment studies have been conducted on an international level, many studies that focused on diverse groups have also been conducted in the U.S. Some have included diverse considerations such as race, class, ethnicity, age, geographic location, and gender. Only a handful of studies have been conducted with African
American, Latino, and Asian American participants and no studies have involved Native American participants.

Despite the paucity of research conducted on these diverse populations, the literature continues to support the tenets of attachment behavior and that children naturally develop an affectional bond with their primary caregiver. However, it is important to note that these studies also helped support the value of cultural differences and variation in the expression of attachment behavior. Harwood and Miller (1991) examined the perception of attachment behavior among Caucasian and Puerto Rican mothers and their findings revealed that although mothers in both groups reported the secure behavior to be the most desired, the Puerto Rican mothers were most likely to focus on the child’s ability to remain calm and develop a “close attachment relationship” (p. 394) while Caucasian mothers demonstrated a higher tendency to emphasize their child’s autonomy and exploratory behavior. This difference emphasizes the importance of considering the cultural expression of attachment behavior.

In one specific study, researchers examined the attachment behavioral patterns among African American preschoolers of families living in an urban community (Barnett, Kidwell, & Leung, 1998). Their findings were consistent with the literature but also revealed intergenerational transmission patterns of an insecure attachment style. In addition, the findings revealed a higher rate of insecure attachment behavior among boys (55%) than among girls (26%). Parents that had high scores of an insecure attachment bond with their children were more likely to use what was defined as “corporal punishment” and were less likely to use verbal reminders when correcting their children’s behaviors. This study also supports general attachment patterns in the parent-child
dynamic across studies. However, as each study is conducted among diverse populations, unique cultural pieces are illustrated to add depth to the obvious attachment bond.

Additional studies have identified developmental changes in attachment patterns in the parent-child bond. Arbona and Power (2003) examined these developmental changes in attachment behavior during the child’s adolescence and explored what those patterns looked like across among African American, Caucasians, and Mexican cultures. Interestingly, the researchers concluded that the father’s role was significantly more important during the adolescent stage than during younger stages. These findings, when tested, were found to be true for all groups and there were no significant differences identified across ethnic groups (Arbona & Power, 2003). The findings suggest that attachment bond is an essential need that can be identified across cultures and that the development of attachment behavior is similar across cultures.

Another conclusion to be drawn from these and many other studies is that the principal tenets of attachment theory are universal: all infants have basic attachment needs and all develop a primary attachment to a caregiver. However, attachment to a primary caregiver may be mediated by context, cultural values, and customs. The characteristics of secure attachment or of what researchers may term a “well-adjusted child” were found to be similar across the cultures of China, Japan, Columbia, Germany, and the U.S. (Posada, et al., 1995). Although there is a basic agreement of attachment bonds among various countries, the exact behaviors of a secure child vary depending on cultural context (van Ijzendoorn, Schengle, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 1999; Arbona & Power, 2003; Brandell & Ringel, 2007).
By working with individuals from varying backgrounds, researchers have been able to learn a diverse amount of information about attachment behavior. Their findings have contained a consistent and growing theme that captures the importance of cultural context to any result. Bretherton (1992) says that, “attachment behavior is heavily overlain with cultural prescriptions; even in a society that much more closely resembles the conditions of human evolution than our own” (p. 774). Because attachment behavior is interconnected with culture I agree with Bretherton (1992) when he suggests that it is critical that researchers invest energy in the development of theory-driven measures tailored specifically to cultures with validity that is based on a deeper knowledge of parents’ and children’s culture-specific folk theories about family relationships and attachment.

**Attachment theory’s application to immigration-related parent-child separation.** Parent-child separation is an experience that may be particularly disruptive to the development of a secure attachment bond. According to Bowlby (1969), the impact of a parent-child separation depends on the quality of the early attachment. Bowlby (1988) suggested that the lack of a stable maternal figure disrupts the development of an enduring attachment bond that puts children at risk for psychological disturbance. Although Bowlby’s (1969) theory was primarily developed out of infant and caregiver relationships, he and others have expanded the theory, realizing that parent-child bonds continue through childhood, adolescence, and the life span (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1982; Heiss, Berman, & Sperling, 1994).

In examining the effect of the attachment bond on parent-child separation, it may be important to consider the developmental time period in which the separation occurred.
Some studies have argued that parental separations during the early childhood years might be most detrimental because of the strong bond and dependence established during this time in the parent-child relationship (Adam & Chase-Lansdale, 2002). Attachment continues to be a critical component during the middle childhood and adolescence phases because the child’s feeling of security is highly determined by their perceptions of the availability of their attachment figures. Any threats to the availability of attachment figures still provoke profound feelings of anxiety, anger, and despair (Kobak, 1998). Kobak (1999) suggested that separation during the adolescent stage subsequently creates distress and injuries to the perceived security and attachment, which may be a leading contributor to the maladaptive behaviors and psychopathology that are observed in older children and adolescents that are left behind.

The level of disturbance experienced in the attachment of a parent-child relationship varies significantly by the child’s developmental stage; however, research suggests the parental response or level of preparation before the separation can have a significant impact on the attachment bond between a child and parent. There are two identified aspects of maternal behavior that influence attachment behavior and separation responses: parental responsiveness, or recognition of distress and actions taken to reassure or protect the child (Ainsworth et al., 1978), and anticipation and preparation of the child for a novel, stressful, or uncertain situation to avoid or minimize danger, distress, or disorganization (Hock, McBride, & Gnezda, 1989; Weinraub & Lewis, 1977). Maternal responsiveness to a child’s feelings, particularly feelings of distress, is likely an attempt to reassure a protesting child prior to departure and a recognition and acknowledgement of the child’s separation experience when they reunite. Because
immigration-related separation, specifically through deportation, often takes place with little to no warning, it is likely that there is little to no preparatory parent-child encounters that can help minimize the levels of distress, anger, and anxiety placed on the parent-child bond.

The child’s behavior during separation is related to maternal preparation and the child’s behavior at reunion is related to maternal emotional responsiveness. Upon reunification, it is typical for there to be a range of emotions; however, it is often difficult to tease apart these feelings because during the separation from their mother, children often develop a strong attachment bond to their surrogate caregivers (e.g., an aunt, cousin, or grandparent). As a result, the child experiences a second separation upon reunification, first from their mother and second, from their surrogate mother (Artico, 2003; Sewell-Coker, Hamilton-Collins, & Fein, 1985). With these families, repairing the bond within the parent-child relationship is a process that usually comes with time and new, positive interactions.

Upon reunification, some children express and cope with their pain through anger and rejection of the parent. Unfortunately, in research studies parents were often ill-equipped to contain the child’s negative feelings toward them, and for the most part they handled the situation poorly. Aricco’s (2003) findings revealed this outcome was due to parents’ fear of being rejected by their children. As a result, the parents displayed either of two main behaviors: they distanced themselves emotionally from the children or attempted to use their power and authority to shape a loving relationship.

These rigid interactions often lead to feelings of rejection and disappointment, which further weakens the ability of the parent-child bond to endure long-term
attachment injury. Szapocznik and Kurtines (1989) stress that disagreements and problems are natural during immigration reunification; however, they also note when conflicts or problems are not resolved, it is usually because of denial that a problem or conflict exists, avoidance of problems, or the inability to focus on one problem or conflict at a time. If parents historically have difficulty resolving conflict and there are other parent-child bonds or relational barriers, the ability to address the various issues during a time of transition (i.e., reunification) will be much more difficult for the family to manage. These three coping methods Szapocznik and Kurtines (1989) referred to above also include a cultural component that adds to challenges of dealing with the situation differently.

When a family is in denial during reunification, the group just avoids openly discussing their feelings regarding separation. The level of denial may vary and the family may acknowledge that they are not getting along but they will not discuss such issues openly. This is the cultural disposition among many Latino groups. Continuous silence increases their belief that it is not good to display a negative effect, and this is only compounded by a general lack of communication and closeness within the parent-child relationship (Zayas & Solari, 1994). Throughout the entire reunification process, the families are bombarded with additional problems and usually display difficulty in keeping problematic issues separate and generating solutions. Generally, negative feelings created by the separation are overshadowed by tending to daily challenges, usually adding to the level of stress and reinforcing a sense of relational failure and hopelessness that the situation will improve. Unfortunately, many of the daily issues that parents are preoccupied with leave them with little time to create experiences with their
children that can better develop the attachment between parent and child (Mitrani et al., 2004).

**Psychological problems.** Strong evidence suggests that experiencing too many losses during the formative years places individuals at an increased risk of developing psychological problems and psychopathology (Bowlby, 1988; Harris & Bifulco, 1991; Japel, Tremblay, Vitaro, & Boulerice, 1999). For many children, parental separation is a major crisis. When a child is separated from a parent, it is typical for the child to exhibit short-term and long-term negative effects. Some short-term effects are a decrease in academic performance, social adjustment, and emotional well-being (Guidubaldi & Perry, 1987; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1979; Morrison & Cherlin, 1995; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). However, some children also exhibit long-term negative effects, psychosocial distress, and health problems (Japel et al., 1999).

In addition to emotional distress, some attachment studies show a positive correlation between the severity of disruption in attachment during childhood and mental illness, as well as proneness to develop conflicting and unsatisfying interpersonal relations in adulthood (Berman & Sperling, 1994; Brennan & Shaver, 1995; Feeney & Shaver, 1995) Many individuals end up having these relational difficulties as they become adults because they tend to use previous relationships and experiences as a guide to help them make sense of their reality. These interpretations of their experiences help individuals develop a consistent sense of self, other, and context in order to keep emotional distress levels manageable (Satir, 1987). These strategies assign meaning to internal and external realities. This is not only influenced by individual characteristics but it is also guided by cultures and sub-cultures (i.e., familial, country of origin), values, and

**Latinos**

The growth of the Latino population in the U.S. has greatly impacted the ethnic makeup of the nation. There are an estimated 35.3 million Latinos living in the U.S. (Landsford, Bornstein, & Deater-Deckard, 2007). In fact, according to the 2004 U.S. Census, the Latino ethnic group has been the fastest-growing in comparison to all minority populations. Between 1990 and 2000, Latinos have increasingly called the U.S. home, with a 57.9% population increase in comparison with the mere 13.2% general U.S. population increase (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). The Latino group comprises a unique collage of races, cultures, origins, and regions that are expected to continue to increase in numbers in the U.S. Under the umbrella of Latino lie various subgroups—Hispanics, Latinos, Hispanos, Latins, and Central and/or South Americans—and these are some of the more general terms used to capture the diversity of Latinos and their identity.

Some Latinos prefer to identify themselves by political affiliation—Chicanos, Xicanos, Ricans, or Boricuas—whereas others affirm their national origins with the terms Mexicans or Mexican Americans, Cubans or Cuban Americans, Colombians, Dominicans, Peruvians, Salvadorans, or Venezuelans, among many others (Comas-Diaz, 2001). There are also Latinos that choose to identify themselves by blending both cultures with terms such as Americanos (Olmos, Ybarra, & Monterrey, 1999) to capture both their Latino heritage and their new American identity.
Each subgroup has unique struggles stemming from a variety of issues, including race, class, political views, geographic location, language, and immigration. Comas-Díaz (2006) explores some of these distinct dilemmas that Latino/a subgroup face:

Mexicans and Mexican Americans experience the pressures of legalities and legalism; Puerto Ricans confront the challenges of dual identities; Cubans face the joys and pains of economic assimilation, Dominicans are subjected to blatant racism because of their predominately African phenotype; and countless South Americans contend with the ambiguities of detachment and belonging. (pp. 436-453)

Although they are oftentimes used interchangeably, the general terms Hispanic and Latino are controversial by definition. Hispanic is defined as relating to people, their speech, or cultural connection to Spain, whereas Latino does not always refer to Spanish origin. It is clear through extensive readings that neither term is accepted by all groups, and there is a trend in the U.S., Central, and Latin America to prefer one term over the other; for example, there are large communities of Cuban Americans in Florida that prefer Hispanic over Latino, whereas Mexicans and Central Americans living in the Los Angeles report a preference for Latino over Hispanic. As mentioned previously, some individuals prefer to identify themselves by neither collective term but instead by country of origin or ancestry (e.g., Mexican, Cuban, or Puerto Rican), as the collective terms do not identify significant within-group racial and cultural variability or the influence of indigenous people (Sue & Sue, 1990; Mitrani et al., 2004; Weisman, 2005). For the purposes of this dissertation, and in following Spanish grammar (Weisman, 2005) Latino is used to refer to both men and women in the U.S. who have come from or have ancestry
from Latin and Central American countries. The clarification in Latino and Hispanic is mentioned in this document to reveal that there is no specific preference, political or ideology that may be associated to the term but instead a method to refer to the diverse umbrella of the Latino and Central American population.

Although Latinos are a diverse people, many share a history of Spanish colonization (culture, religion, language, and worldview), an “experience of uprooting, separation, or immigration, and exposure to oppression” (Comas-Diaz, 2001, p.436). Overall, Latin American immigration to the U.S. differs from European immigration. Gonzalez (2000) reveals two major reasons why Latin American immigration has been so uniquely different:

First, Latinos entering the U.S. was originally generated by the expansionist needs of the U.S. A clear illustration of this can be captured when the U.S. accepted Cubans, Dominicans, Salvadorans, and Nicaraguans as refugees for political reasons, whereas Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Panamanians were viewed as necessities to accomplish labor demands of developing industries in the U.S.

Second, Latin immigrants were generally not perceived or experienced as immigrants that have come to stay in the U.S. (2000; cited in Comas-Diaz, 2006, p. 439)

Currently, there are more native-born than immigrant Latinos living in the U.S.; however, it is important to note that for every five Latinos born in the U.S., there are two immigrants (Rios-Ellis, Aguilar-Gaxiola, Cabassa, Caetano, Comas-Diaz, & Flores, 2005). These numbers reflect the diverse makeup of Latinos in general and furthermore have direct implications for their families living in the U.S. Current U.S. Census statistics
indicate that one out of every ten children under the age 18 in the U.S. is living in a mixed status household where one parent is a citizen and the other parent is a non citizen (2004). Because of their blended ties, many Latinos live in a “both/and” state (Hardy & Lazsloffy, 2002), making meaning of their lives through a lens that constantly gives them an insider/outsider status (Stavans, 1996). There is a Spanish saying that captures the discomfort of the push-pull experience of Latinos living the U.S.: “Con el culo entre dos sillas” (“with my ass between two chairs”; Falicov, 1998). These forces include the loss, gain, as well as assimilation of political, economical, financial, and cultural changes.

Flores (1992) commented about the experience of these changes:

> [It is an] imposing flow of reality with its hallucinating proposal of newer, furiously conquered spaces. It is the relentless flow of a people who float between two ports, licensed for the smuggling of human hopes. (p. 201)

Many Latino immigrants living in the U.S. relate to these struggles because of the close ties that they maintain with their countries of origin. They keep their lives alive in those countries by maintaining residency. It is not uncommon for Latinos to have a place they call home in their countries of origin; many Latinos stay in close contact with family “back home” and are more likely to visit more often if their parents, grandparents and/or siblings still reside there; and by providing financial or other support to loved ones “back home” that may be struggling or that might need assistance in immigrating to the U.S.

**Immigration**

Making the decision to leave one’s country of origin is not always a time of elation. In fact, there are a variety of reasons that Latinos decide to come to the U.S. The increase in Latin American immigration reflects changing economic and political
situations both here and abroad. Many Latinos (predominately Mexicans) come to the U.S. for stability, as well as financial and educational opportunities for their children. Although there are new ventures growing in México and other Latin American countries, high rates of unemployment, poverty, and increasing birth rates continue to contribute to lack of education and advancement. More recently, the lacks of employment opportunities (Vidal de Haymes & Kilty, 2007) and increased societal hardship (Hiott et al., 2006) have prompted immigrants to seek refuge and opportunities in the U.S.

In immigrating to the U.S., individuals are participating in the process of movement from one country to another, oftentimes with the purpose of permanently changing their place of residence (Hernandez, Denton, & Macartney, 2007). When asked, many Latinos reported that they decided to come to the U.S. in order to give their families an opportunity for a better life and to escape poverty, low employment rates, and high levels of crime (Hiott et al., 2006). This reasoning is often seen among Latino couples who decide to relocate and start their families in the U.S. But when asked if they plan to stay in the U.S., Latino immigrants often reported a desire to return to their countries of origin.

Another common pattern of immigration among Latinos is of parents (one or both) immigrating to the U.S. while leaving children in their countries of origin in the care of grandparents, aunts, or older siblings. Whether the immigration journey is made alone or with a spouse, children, or the entire family, it often consists of entering the U.S. undocumented, which is illegal and carries the risk for deportation back to the country of origin without notice. It is estimated that there are roughly nine million undocumented Latinos living in the Unites States (Hoefer et al., 2007). Because of the booming
economy during the past ten years, many undocumented Latinos have been able to obtain employment with typically physically strenuous jobs (e.g., factories, landscaping, restaurants, etc).

As mentioned above and throughout this research, many Latino immigrants who have limited options leave their country of origin for better opportunities in the U.S. Often, the immediate option is to enter the country illegally and live through the additional hardship that is placed on the family when one or both of the parents are discovered to be undocumented. Thus, it only seems appropriate to ask whether entering the country illegally is worth the risk of being deported back to the country of origin and potentially separated from family. Examining the long-term goals or impact of an individual entering the U.S. illegally might elucidate the answer to that very question.

Aside from all the risks that may be experienced because of illegal entry into the U.S., one long-term goal is achieved: gene survival. Charles Darwin extensively discussed his theory that it is in humans’ best interest to procreate in order to pass on their genes. He believed it was imperative to have access to the best resources in order to strengthen the chance of success and survival of future generations (Cartwright, 2000). Through Darwin’s argument it becomes clear that there are potential rewards that are greater than the risk of being deported. One such reward is a legacy of survival for future generations that will live in the U.S. legally with all the privileges afforded any U.S. citizen. With an estimated 9 million undocumented Latinos living in the U.S. (Hoefer et al., 2007) it has become very obvious that for many this reward is worth the risk and the beneficiaries of a parent’s illegal immigration to the U.S. are the U.S.-born children. This is it not to minimize the traumatizing experiences that may result from entering the
country illegally; however, it does reveal the underlying reality that the opportunity to raise a family in the U.S. is worth the risk of potentially being deported.

The Legacy of Latino Families

Although there are many subcategories under the Latino umbrella, there are a few common threads seen among many Latino populations that contribute to the unique and rich Latino culture. Some of these threads include the roles that family, spirituality, language, and immigration play in Latino families. Like in any culture, Latinos are exposed to a series of messages throughout their lives that reinforce a worldview or larger orientation that informs them how to make meaning of self, other, and the context around them (Hardy & Laszloffy, 2002; Falicov, 1998). More specifically, Latinos “define themselves within the context of a relationship to others and to a collective” (Comas-Diaz, 2006, p. 437). This reference or self-identity through other relationships, particularly family relationships, creates interconnectedness between self and family.

Family. Within the literature there is a consensus that many Latino Americans attribute more importance to the family as a sense of emotional support than do non-Latinos (Halgunseth, Ispa, & Ruby, 2006; Harwood, Leyendecker, Carlson, Asencio, & Miller, 2002; Umana, Taylor, & Fine, 2004). It is not uncommon for a typical Latino household to consist of multiple generations living under one roof. Elders are considered to be wise and have a critical role in the family dynamic (Falicov, 1998). In general, parental status is high and children’s status is low. Likewise, parent-child relationships are often cohesive usually from childhood all the way through adulthood.

Good children are expected to demonstrate support, loyalty, and respect to their parents. Within the Latino community, the idea of respeto (respect) within the parent-
child relationship consists of a highly emotionalized dependence and dutifulness within a fairly authoritarian framework (Diaz-Guerrero, 1975). Illustrations of this respect and loyalty to parents can be seen, mostly dramatized, in Spanish-speaking television programs and novelas (soap operas), where it seems that one of the worst things any character can ever do is to value anyone or anything over the parents, which can include moving away, marrying someone that the mother does not approve of, talking back, and/or wanting more privacy or independence from parents. Typically, submission and obedience are stressed by the authority of the father and mothers have an affectional focus for their children while mediating the difficulties between Latino fathers and their children (Martinez, 1994; Ramirez, 1998).

The definition of family within the Latino community is one that includes the nuclear family, extended family and close family friends. It can typically consist of three to four generations and encompass horizontal family members as well, such as cousins, aunts, uncles, and compadres y comadres (godfather and godmother). These various members are a part of the family and can be relied on for daily family involvement, assistance with childcare/childrearing, and emotional/financial support. This collective orientation is known as familismo (familism), the Latino cultural term used to describe the importance of extended family ties and the strong identification and attachment of individuals with families (Triandis, Marin, Betancourt, Lisansky, & Chang, 1982). Familismo is not unique to Latino culture and has been identified as an important value for other ethnic groups such as African Americans, Asian Americans, and American Indians (Marín & Triandis, 1985; Marín & Gamba, 2003). Familismo is a part of a larger paradigm called collectivism, which refers to individuals and societies that put group
goals above personal goals (Kim, Triandis, Kagitcibasi, Choi, & Yoon, 1994). It includes emotional proximity, affective resonance, interpersonal involvement, and cohesiveness (Falicov, 1998). Likewise, with familismo it is more typical to find Latinos migrating towards rather than moving away from extended family, as Anglo Americans often do (Mindel, 1980). Children that either immigrated themselves or whose parents immigrated to the U.S. often internalize a sense of obligation toward the family (Fuligni, 1998), thus fueling the perspective of familismo. Being raised by immigrant parents may also invoke a sense of responsibility in Latino children that provides them with the motivation to excel in the U.S. For example, Esparza and Sanchez’s (2008) research on familismo found that academically excelling children of immigrant parents had a positive correlation with familismo, which suggests that high levels of familismo contributed to a healthy emotional state.

Even though the values of familismo have many benefits, they also conflict with the predominant individualistic culture in the U.S. Many Latinos living in the U.S. experience a cultural clash between individualistic and collectivistic values during the initial phase of the acculturation process. Most immigrants experience a level of distress as they make meaning of their new lives in the U.S. and how it impacts their identity. Latinos often arrive to this country with dreams of establishing themselves and offering their children better opportunities. However, as immigrants they are oftentimes ill-prepared for the acculturation process (Weisman, 2005). Acculturation has been defined as the process of change that results from continuous contact between two different cultures (Berry, Trimble, & Olmedo, 1986). Acculturation may be a challenging process because it often includes experiences of culture-specific stressors such as discrimination,
minority status, and language stress (Cervantes, Padilla, & Salgado de Snyder, 1990, 1991; Padilla, Alvarez, & Lindholm, 1986). However, not all acculturation experiences are negative; Edwards and Lopez’s (2006) research suggests that adolescents that were exposed to both worlds can have a positive experience of acculturation if their level of perceived unconditional parental love and support is high.

Crean (2008) prefaced a study on Latino immigrant families with the observation that “[in] many instances, the research on the Latino culture has tended to romanticize the natural strengths of familismo, often overlooking the fact that conflict within the family may exist, may be frequent, and may be damaging” (p. 489). In my clinical experience I have had experiences that suggest that Latino immigrant families are unique and diverse and that there are also risks associated with immigration-related separation that may contribute to the increase of distress on the attachment bond in the parent-child relationship.

**Spirituality.** The dominating organized religion in all of Latin America and the Caribbean is Roman Catholicism (Bacy-Rita, 1982; Weisman, 2005). With so many differences within the Latino culture, “Catholicism often acts as a common denominator of beliefs and values for many Latinos. Differences in specific content and blends of native religions vary considerably from country to country [and] group to group” (Falicov, 1998, p.145). Some other increasingly practiced religions include Protestantism, Pentecostalism, Jehovah Witnesses, Judaism, and other evangelical fundamental faiths. In addition to these religions, many Latino populations celebrate and believe in a range of ideologies that are demonstrated through spiritual practices. This is not uncommon because religion, spirituality, beliefs, values, and rituals are often blended together.
In this document religion and spirituality are not placed in any hierarchy, and throughout the text a variety of terms will be used (i.e., spiritual, spirituality, religion, religiosity) to represent the construct of both words. In general, religion is used to refer to a shared and organized doctrine, whereas spirituality is used to refer more to one’s quest for meaning and purpose and the core values that influence behavior (Sperry, 2001). There are different recommendations in the literature on how to study religion and spirituality. Weisman (2005) highlighted that it would be beneficial to examine these constructs separately in future studies. But Hill and Pargament (2003) shared that they were opposed to making the two terms interchangeable. However in this document the terms will be used interchangeably to refer to the vast range of ideas on religious or spiritual practices.

A significant number of Latinos practice or are exposed to folk religions or healing practices (i.e., Curanderismo, Espiritismo, and Santeria; Harris, Velázquez, White, & Renteria, 2004). Some of the spiritual beliefs practiced independently or incorporated into more organized religions like Catholicism or Christianity are Santeria and Espiritismo. Santeria is a mystical religion based on the ancient West African religion Ifa, which rose to significance in Latino and Caribbean countries when enslaved Africans who practiced Ifa were brought to land which caused an exchange of Catholicism and Santeria. Espiritismo should not be viewed as a religion per se but rather a spiritual belief system (Baez & Hernandez, 2001). According to Baez and Hernandez (2001) Espiritismo is the “belief that people also encounter untranquil, unevolved or evil spirits, sometimes by happenstance, sometimes because of spells brujería (witchcraft); and that spirits of various types can exert a profound influence on human life, causing
either good or harm of all types” (p. 411). Although many Latinos are self-proclaimed “devout Catholics,” there are folk beliefs that some Latinos incorporate to their worldviews.

Although there is a variation in beliefs and to the extent to which they are practiced, there does exist a general and shared belief for a range of illnesses that individuals may experience. One of the most commonly referenced illnesses is the *mal ojo* (evil eye), which is sometimes associated with *brujeria*. The *mal ojo* is believed to be a more general phenomenon that explains illnesses with a variety of symptoms, including *ataques de nervios* (attack of the nerves) and other psychosomatic experiences (Falicov, 1998). Investigators have collected data that suggest that the association of health/illness to the meaning made through spirituality can contribute to why some Latino families may need more psycho-education about possible medical treatment for serious mental health illnesses such as schizophrenia. This is because so much meaning and comfort is drawn from religion and/or spiritual frameworks (Organista & Muñoz, 1996; Kouyoumdjian, Zamboanga, & Hansen, 2003).

In predominately Catholic Latino societies, there are often visible references (behavioral rituals/practices) observed to Catholicism daily, through television programs, murals of the virgin Mary painted on houses or on the back of trucks and vans, the presence of the crucifix or saint figurines in homes, and the fact that Maria (the Spanish name for the mother of Jesus Christ) has remained the most common name female name for decades in México and Latin and Central America. Additionally, Catholicism has a central focus in Latino rites of passage: baptisms, first communions, *quinceneras* (a girl’s fifteenth birthday), weddings, funerals, and so on.
According to Falicov (1998), Catholicism is the belief in God as a supreme being in life after death, and in the existence of a soul. Beliefs about heaven and hell, sin, guilt, and shame also play a role in meaning making and in attributions of responsibility. Catholicism also encompasses some magical thinking, belief in miracles, propitiatory rituals, promises (*promesas*), and prayers. While small altars to saints are everywhere in the streets of Latin America, immigrants create home altars with flowers, crucifixes, bottles of holy water, and saints depicted in plastic statuettes or postcards. These practices are not gratuitous – they bring emphasis to the Latino’s value on enduring suffering and denying self in exchange for needed favors (p. 147).

For many Latino immigrants, the church and their Catholic faith and practices in the U.S. provide spiritual guidance and support in addition to a sense of familiarity with their countries of origin, their people, their customs, and their sense of belonging and normalcy. Typically, Latino immigrants remain devout Catholics when they relocate to the U.S., which is consistent with findings that suggest Latinos are more likely to turn to their faith for support during a challenging time than to turn away from their faith (Weisman, 2003). The significant role that Catholicism plays in the identity of Latino immigrants living in the U.S. may have been best stated by Martinez and Wetli (1982):

> And so la Virgen [de Guadalupe] is called upon to cure ills north and south for loved ones or for anyone else who suffers. This gathering in Los Angeles [to celebrate the day of the Virgin of Guadalupe] might not be as monumental as the festival in México City. But there is an intensity here that matches or maybe even surpasses the devotion back home. Perhaps it is the yearning to remain rooted in a
rootless time where one’s address can’t be changed by twists of the economy or the border patrol. (p.33)

Longsuffering and survival through adversity is a theme that is continuously woven throughout Catholicism and parallels with some of the difficulties that Latino immigrants face upon their arrival to the U.S. Likewise, a Latino’s locus of control often begins and ends with faith: “External control perspectives from both Catholicism and folk healing religions may send the message that individuals are not at fault for their adversities (i.e., symptoms of mental illness) and that what happens to others can also happen to oneself” (Weisman, 2005, p. 182). This worldview through the lens of spirituality can create sense of comfort that the individual is not suffering alone. However, an external locus of control is often attributed to paranoia, anxiety, or irritability with a belief that misfortune might have been brought on by a hex from an enemy or because recent behavior has not been pleasing to God (Weisman, 2005).

For Latinos that are religious or self proclaimed devout Catholics, faith is typically larger than being a part of religion; it also provides a context for their identity, family, community, and a sense that life has a purpose. This may be more critical specifically for Latino immigrants living in the U.S. because their faith may be the only thing that feels constant and familiar during the first few months or years after their arrival to the U.S.

Language. Because many immigrant families consist of at least one parent who was born in another country, it is fairly common for there to be a language other than English spoken in the home. The resulting challenge is that the level of communication within the parent-child relationship is often reliant on the child’s proficiency in Spanish
and the parent’s proficiency in English. These limitations could lead to other communication challenges for the family, but more typically it enables children to become bilingual (Hernandez, Denton, & Macartney, 2007). Nonetheless, language is a key factor in the way that Latino immigrants experience the world around them.

For many Latinos, the Spanish language is not just a way to communicate; it also possesses the remnants of a unique culture, identity, history, and geographic location. Latinos from different racial backgrounds and different countries, cities, and villages all speak slightly different variations of Spanish if not completely different dialects altogether. For example, a Puerto Rican or Cuban may call a bus *el gua gua* (both of these countries have a larger African influence than other Latin American countries), whereas in México City, México, and Distrito Federal (one of the largest metropolitan cities in Latino America) the vehicle is known as *el bus* (Shorris, 1992).

The diversity of the Spanish language makes it rich because so much of the language is reflective of the racial makeup of the Latino population (Spanish, African and Indigenous decent) and its residential communities. Because of the coexistence of various racial cultures, most Latin American countries usually recognize multiple languages. For example, México has more than 60 identified languages (Gordon, 2005). In some instances, Latinos that know Spanish as secondary to the language they spoke as children. This is true in Guatemala (the third largest group of immigrant Latinos in the U.S. come from here), where people from the Guatemalan highlands may grow up speaking Quichean-Mamean but learn Spanish through education or relocation to a larger city (Gordon, 2005).
Research on immigrant children and language has been mixed. Some research has shown that immigrant children are often handicapped by differences in language and communication style and skills. These challenges often create learning barriers associated with behavioral problems (Aronowitz, 1984; McLaughlin, 2002; Norrid-Lacey & Spencer, 2000). However, other findings suggest that bilingual children do better in the long run through exposure to more than one language (Tabors, 2008; Bialystok, 2001; Winsler, Diaz, Espinosa, & Rodriguez, 1999). For some Latinos living in the U.S., language has been an open door, granting access to a multitude of opportunities. Many times, these opportunities have increased the chances of parents continuing their education, getting better paying jobs, living in safer communities, and providing security and stability for their families.

**Immigration and separation.** During the last decade there has been a visible increase in the number of Latinos immigrating to the U.S. Although many Latino immigrants have achieved the American dream, research suggests that most of their immigration and acculturation-related experiences have imposed stressors that tend to disproportionately affect their families (Mitrani et al., 2004). For many Latino families, family separation is practically an unavoidable immigrant-related experience that typically evolves into a stressor etching long-lasting effects; usually negative (Mitrani et al., 2004). Family separation is a stressor that is often challenged to its maximum, specifically when mothers and children immigrate separately to the U.S.

Whether the separation is through immigration to the U.S. or through deportation, both have incremental residual impact on the individuals and families involved. Immigrants and refugees are among the most traumatized and vulnerable groups of
people, as they are confronted with struggles that include disastrous individual and/or family breakdown and loss, the collapse of marriages, and racial prejudice and discrimination (Hsu, Davies, & Hansen, 2004; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Qin-Hilliard, 2005; Yu, 1997). It has been estimated that in 2007, 500,000 Latinos entered the U.S. illegally. Many illegal immigrants trek more than 50 miles through the desert on foot to cross the Mexican/U.S border (Batalova, 2008). Some make it across, while others are caught and sent back to their countries of origin with nothing but hopes of attempting the journey again someday. Others are not so lucky and too often they die from dehydration, are murdered by notorious gangs that prey on transients, or in some cases (mostly young girls, women, and young boys) are kidnapped and sold into human trafficking, never to be seen again (U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service [INS], 2007). Because of the dangers of immigration-related separation, Perez Foster (2001) has stated that Latinos are at considerable risk for being exposed to trauma during the transit to America from México, Central America, or the Caribbean.

Literature on consequences of immigration-related separation is scarce (Woodward, Fergusson, & Belsky, 2000; Mitrani et al., 2004). Among the limited research there are some studies that have developed findings that recommend more research on the topic. Suarez-Orozco, Todorova, and Louie (2002) were among the first to offer a findings which came from the Longitudinal Immigration Adaptive Study which was conducted at Harvard University. Their research cited negative effects for children separated from parents, including attachment difficulties, depressive responses, and behavioral problems; however, they warned that because these reports were based on clinical samples, psychological consequences could be overestimated.
Artico’s (2003) findings were similar to those found from Suarez-Orozco et al., (2002) when the impact of immigration relation separation was explored. Artico’s study was a thorough qualitative study where adolescents (ages 15-19) were interviewed and asked about what it was like for them to go through the process of separation and reunification with their families. After the in depth interview the adolescents participated in an experiential sand tray activity to further process their experiences. The adolescents were predominately from Central American and all of them were left behind in their country of origin as their parents migrated to the U.S. for several years to seek work or other opportunities. One of the significant differences about this study was that it was one of the first that was exclusively interested in the child or adolescents accounts, feelings, and memory about the experience. During the interviews adolescents talked about resilience, support, and reconciling. Artico stated that previous findings on migration related parent-child separation from the caregivers perspective often times focused on the child’s behavior and pathology.

Pre-adolescence/adolescence is a critical period in which a child experiences a series of dramatic changes in physical development, social relations, identity, sexuality, behavior, high levels of family changes, and renegotiation of the parent-child relationship—all part of the typical developmental milestones (Simmons, Burgeson, Carlton-Ford, & Blyth, 1987; Kegan, 1982). Unfortunately, many immigration-related separations between parents and children take place when children are still minors and reliant on parents as the sole or primary caregivers. Parent-child separation creates instability within the family environment, which causes acute stress for the children. The severity of the stress often disrupts their sense of security and ability to successfully cope
with stressors that are present at each developmental stage (Adam & Chase-Lansdale, 2002).

Immigration-related separation is different from other types of separation because it is usually unexpected; neither the parent nor child knows when they will be reunited, the law often prohibits the return of the parent, the parent and child live in two different countries, and many times significant anxiety is developed relating to the fear that other illegal family members will be deported. When an undocumented individual is arrested and deported back to his or her country of origin it is counted as a criminal offense. Because of this, residual experiences such as deportation or detention may occur after the immediate separation. In this instance, children are not only separated from their parent but they also experience additional stress as their parent is detained in jail for a period of time ranging from days to months. After detention the parent is sent back to his or her country of origin (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2006). This process can be extremely confusing and frightening for children.

There are some factors that make immigrant-related separation different from divorce-related parent-child separation. When an undocumented individual is arrested and deported back to their country of origin it is a criminal offense. Because of this residual experiences may occur after the immediate separation (i.e. deportation or detention). In this instance, children are not only separated from their parent but also experience additional stress as their parent is detained in jail for a period of time ranging anywhere from days to months. After their time in detention they are sent back to their country of origin (Department of Homeland Security, 2006). This process can be extremely confusing and scary for children. Families that experience deportation-related
separation also describe shame and isolation related to their experience since parental deportation is not treated as a socially acceptable form of separation and loss. Because of the sensitivity to the subject of undocumented immigrants in the U.S., families with a deported family member sometimes receive negative and racially charged remarks from those that may be opposed to undocumented immigrants living in the U.S. Parent-child separation related to deportation often consists of criminal and legal issues which can make the remaining family feel powerless and scared for further legal repercussions (Doka, 1989).

Culturally, this may be an especially difficult role for the father to fulfill because nurturing is typically a role assumed by Latina mothers, while fathers are seen as the providers (Martinez, 1994; Ramirez, 1998). As a result, fathers may be recruited to become even more active and sensitive in the nurturing role with daughters (Way & Gillman, 2000). A study by Bronstein (1999) has noted a difference in how Mexican American parents treat their children, suggesting that Mexican American mothers tend to treat boys and girls similarly, whereas fathers tend to treat boys (reprimanding-restrictive treatment) and girls (gentle treatment) distinctively differently. These findings may suggest there are unique experiences that arise determined on which parent is deported and the gender of the child left behind.

**Ambiguous Loss**

One major factor that distinguishes immigration-related separation from some other forms of separation is that it is so heavily imbued with ambiguity. Ambiguous loss has been identified as one of the newer forms of loss and defined more specifically as
occurring when a loved one is missing physically or physiologically (Boss, 2002). An individual can experience ambiguous loss as a result of not knowing whether a loved one is permanently gone or returning, emotionally available or unavailable, or in more extreme cases, dead or alive. Regardless of cultural background, all families experience of loss and are left with the task of coping with those feelings and the relationships that are impacted.

Existing literature on the topic has identified two forms of ambiguous loss. Physical ambiguous loss occurs when the loved one is physically absent and because their life can not be confirmed or denied, the family is stuck in a situation where things are really unclear. Physical ambiguous loss can take place as a result of kidnapping, human trafficking, or with runaways, deported immigrants, or loved ones that leave their country of origin to seek employment in foreign territories (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2002). This type of loss is also present in situations of war, ethnic cleansing, and natural disasters such as, a hurricanes, earthquakes, and mudslides.

The second type of ambiguous loss is psychological loss with physical presence. This type can be just as challenging to experience as physical loss because an individual has to co-exist with a loved one that is physically close but physiologically absent or unavailable. Families experience psychological ambiguous loss when a loved is battling depression, dementia, chronic mental illness, brain injury, or various forms of addiction. The sense of a loved one being physically present and physiologically absent can be caused by, among other things, unexpected, intense, or traumatizing experiences that take loved ones to another place and time as they try to cope with the difficult experience.
Relocation due to immigration or migration or loss of culture or identity can make it challenging for family members to remain connected and emotionally available.

Although these two types of loss have distinct differences it is critical to remember that they are still loss. Families continue to deal with the challenges of reconciling their loss through validation within their community and culture. Families that feel that they are not allowed to process their loss or that their loss is something negative or shameful families have to deal with multiple layers of loss, shame, and isolation (Boss, 2006); therefore, it is important to consider a community’s cultural values regarding the loss that was experienced and the various forms of support that may be offered to the family (Mann, 2004). As a result these values, many families cope with extraordinary circumstances such as the ambiguous loss of a loved one through establishing a sense of hope, which can lead to a gateway of resilience (Frankl, 2006; Boss, 2006). Depending on cultural practices and personal beliefs, spirituality may play a significant role in the family’s ability to cope with the loss. Current research has revealed that spirituality can help or hinder the family’s healing journey (Sinnott, 2008) as they try to determine whether the loss they are experiencing is permanent or temporary.

The difficulty with ambiguous loss is that it freezes the grieving process (Boss, 1999) and fogs cognition, which blocks coping and decision-making processes. As a result, closure becomes impossible and families are left to construct their own truth about the loss make meaning of all that goes with the process (Boss, 2002, 2004, 2006). Latino families are just one of many groups impacted by ambiguous loss and ambiguous loss is just one of many issues related to immigrant Latino families dealing with separation through deportation.
If the experience of ambiguous loss persists the outcomes can be detrimental. Some of the relational outcomes of ambiguous loss include family/couple conflict, separation (divorce, cut-off), cessation of family rituals/traditions, mistrust of professionals and their credibility, and anger if/when individuals interact with these professionals. Ambiguous loss can cause significant stress on relationships; however, individuals experience a lot of issues too. Some of the individual outcomes include depression, anxiety, substance abuse, violence, and even suicide (Boss, 2006).

Boss (2006) has developed a circular model with six guidelines for intervention that can be used to help treat individuals and families that have experienced prolonged ambiguous loss. The researcher stresses consideration of how the model is organized prior to utilization. It is not linear and is labeled circular because it is meant to be applied as a process model, meaning that it works over time and is applicable for families that have experienced chronic ambiguous loss.

The six guidelines for intervention are: 1) finding meaning, 2) tempering mastery, 3) reconstructing identity, 4) normalizing ambivalence, 5) revising attachment, and 6) discovering hope. Each of these guidelines plays an important role. Finding meaning refers to naming the problem and looking at suffering as a part of life. Tempering mastery refers to externalizing the blame. In reconstructing identity the family is given permission to redefine and find flexibility in family roles. Normalizing ambivalence includes normalizing negative feelings and guilt but not harmful actions. Revising attachment refers to rebuilding new and existing human connections through relationships that help with healing. Finally, discovering hope refers to increasing tolerance for ambiguity and
recreating family traditions (Boss, 2006). The use of these cyclical intervention
guidelines can help families heal from the traumatic experience of ambiguous loss.

Understanding ambiguous loss is critical because it is a relational experience that
comes from an event and is not developed within an individual’s psyche. This means
ambiguous loss can happen to anyone at any time. As more forms of ambiguous loss are
uncovered (e.g., immigration and Alzheimer’s disease), it becomes even more evident
how these forms of losses impact relationships, families, and communities (Boss, 2004, 2006).

Illegitimate Loss

Separation related to deportation creates a multifaceted experience of loss. One of
the main challenges of ambiguous loss is related to trying to reconcile the loss without
the presence of closure or definitive answers. This challenge often interrupts the grief and
loss process and subsequently adds even more stress to the family members that were
originally left without answers. However, when exploring the experience of loss related
to parental deportation there are additional factors that must be considered. Unlike a
divorce or death, the loss of parent due to deportation is experienced because the parent
engaged in an act that is not acceptable or in accordance with the law. Entering the U.S.
illegally is an act that is not authorized by the law, which by definition labels the act and
the subsequent loss experience as “illegitimate.” First discussed by Haas Cunningham,
(2010) illegitimate loss is one not recognized as loss by others because of the unlawful
act that created the loss. Individuals that experience an illegitimate loss are exposed to the
conflicting experience of their loss and the pressures to minimize or even demonize the
person creating the loss. What makes illegitimate loss particularly difficult is the burden
of shame or the need to defend oneself or the family while still dealing with a very recent and real loss.

Similarly, *disenfranchised grief/loss* occurs when a community or society does not recognize or validate the existence or importance of the relationship, the loss, or the griever. Because the loss is perceived as illegitimate (i.e., deportation due to illegal entry into the U.S.) or disenfranchised (i.e., not recognizing deportation as a significant loss), often the community does not acknowledge the family’s loss and does not join in with expressions of sadness, pain, compassion, or understanding (Doka, 1989). Families very quickly learn that their loss “is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported” (Doka, 1989, p.4). Similar to ambiguous loss and illegitimate loss, when a griever of disenfranchised loss is not allowed or does not feel safe to acknowledge the loss, he or she quickly becomes isolated. Isolation and lack of social support may intensify the situation, making the family even less equipped to cope. In addition to the isolation, the loss that family members feel is also nonfinite (Bruce & Schultz, 2003) in that it is continuous and denies the family of all of the hopes, dreams, and expectations that they had for the loved one who was deported back to their country of origin.

**Complexity of Multiple Losses**

Several types of loss have been identified thus far in the attempt to give voice to the experience of parental separation through deportation, which is a difficult situation that is many times described as a life-changing event (Artico, 2003). When a parent is separated from a child it is a loss that obviously impacts the parent, the child, and the entire family dynamic. The loss of “how things used to be” is experienced from the day
the parent is taken away until and even through the reunification phase; however, there is a preexisting layer of grief and loss that can potentially render a parent’s deportation much more complex.

Immigrants and refugees are among the most traumatized and vulnerable groups because they are confronted with struggles that impact the individual and family at large. Some of these struggles include loss, lack of support, poverty, racial prejudice, and discrimination – and that is no less true for Latino immigrants (Hsu, Davies, & Hansen, 2004; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2005; Yu, 1997). Because of this, many Latino immigrant families experience a variety of losses before the loss of and separation from an undocumented parent. It is critical to highlight the daily preexisting stressors, pains, and losses that families experience well before the point of parental deportation because this adds a richer description of immigration and defines loss through deportation as more than an isolated experience; instead, it is often a build-up of other experiences of disappointment, neglect, and abuse, or a loss of self, spirituality, or community.

Undocumented immigrants living in the U.S are aware that every day they are at risk for being detained and deported back to their country of origin; however, once in the U.S. there are daily struggles and stressors on the family that expose the family to violence, violation, loss, and grief long before the deportation of an undocumented parent (Weingarten, 2003).

Despite the rapid and dramatic rise in deportation from the U.S. in recent years, I have been unable to find any studies that have addressed the impact that parental deportation has on family members left behind here in the U.S. Deportees are more likely to leave behind a spouse or child in the U.S. without any legal recourse for reunification.
As a result, many deportees end up sneaking back into the U.S. to reunite with their families. This dissertation represents a first research attempt to address the experience of deportation and reunification from the perspective of children that were left behind. Parent-child separation is often times accompanied by residual psychological, social and economic disruptions. These issues are explored with a focus on how these residual issues impact the parent-child bond.
CHAPTER III

Methods

This study aimed to understand better the impact of the parent-child separation and reunification through deportation and how this experience impacts the child’s experience of the parent-child relationship. The purpose was also to highlight the way that deportation impacts relationships in the family and the potential loss and emotional distress that is associated with their experience. In addition, attention was given to the meaning participants made of the legal implications of deportation in relation to their families. In sharing their story, participants were provided the space to engage in a rich narrative about their lived experience. A qualitative method of inquiry was used to analyze and investigate the stories that participants shared in their own words.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is a relational process in which the researcher’s task is to connect with, understand, report on, and share his or her unique experience or topic. It is a research method supported by a paradigm that “portrays a world in which reality is socially constructed, complex and ever changing” (Glesne, 1999, p.5) and does so by “involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p.2). In order to capture the experience or phenomenon of the informant, the researcher analyzes words, reports their reality/ meaning-making, and reveals rich narratives in their natural setting (Creswell, 1998). In addition, a thorough analysis produces a document that captures the experience of the participants, a better understanding of the phenomenon itself, is an exploration of the interpretation that is subjective to the researcher and a discussion of the researcher’s own biases to the topic (Fine, 1994).
Characteristics of Qualitative Research

When qualitative research is selected as a method of inquiry it is often times because of these five characteristics that are associated with it: meaning, naturalistic, descriptive data, inductive and process (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). It is these five characteristics that assist in the process of understanding the meaning of a lived experience. Unlike quantitative research, which is bound by observation, measurement, and known objectivity; qualitative inquiry acts as catalysis for rich detail, feelings, and the process of a shared experience. When doing well, qualitative research can be a process that illuminates lives as well as creates understanding and meaning (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

When researchers choose to do a qualitative study they are in fact interested in getting to the depth of an issue rather than attending to the ‘breadth of an issue’. Because of this, a typical qualitative study will usually consist of a small sample size which includes a rich/ in-depth description of the interviewee’s experience, reality, and meaning making. In collecting such extensive information, the researcher uses himself/herself as a primary instrument, which allows the researcher to explore his/her subjectivity or biases (Guba & Lincoln, 1981).

Ragin (1987) highlights what a qualitative researcher does in comparison to a quantitative researcher. A quantitative researcher works with a few variables and many subjects, whereas a qualitative researcher relies on a fewer number of subjects and many variables. Regardless of the different forms of data that may be collected (e.g., interviews, observations, documents, and audio/video) the researcher uses it to describe patterns, analyze the stories, and externalize concepts and themes that come from the
experiences that people have shared from their lives. Because depth of the experience is one of the foundations for qualitative research, it permits me to not only capture the experience of the participants but it also allows them to experience it as well. Less focus is placed on finding an ‘exact’ truth or reality and more focus is placed on providing a voice for participants to share their stories, truths, realities, and lives with the world around them. The researcher is just a tool, a catalyst that allows others to make contact and experience the complexity of someone else’s reality. But even from a less global standpoint, qualitative research creates space for a collaborative experience between the researcher and participants.

While collecting data the researcher typically goes through a back and forth rhythm of interviewing, interpreting data, and going back to participants for clarification. During this time it is also important for the researcher to explore his or her own biases and the effect of their own subjectivity on the phenomenon they are studying (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Since it is impossible to isolate ones biases, researchers must be mindful to continuously confront and understand how their own ideas may influence the interpretation of the research. The researchers that attempt to be transparent and collaborative will at best co-create a research experience that is inclusive with rich findings that speak and deliver the truth of the participants. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) ascertain that the goal in qualitative research is to illuminate and understand participants’ lived experiences, which is easier to do when researchers are reflective and conscious of how they influence and contribute to the research.
Phenomenology

Within qualitative research there are several traditions of inquiry such as, phenomenology, biography, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study (Denzin, 1989b; Moustakas, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Strake, 1995). This dissertation will be guided by the tradition of social phenomenology. Much of the phenomenological inquiry is guided by the scholar van Manen. Specifically, van Manen’s work focuses on hermeneutic-phenomenological research. He describes hermeneutics-phenomenology as “philosophy of the personal, the individual, which we pursue against the background of an understanding of the evasive character of the logos of the other, the whole, the communal or the social” (van Manen, 1990, p. 7). I will use the tradition of hermeneutic-phenomenology because I am interested in the lived experiences of Latino immigrants that have experienced parent-child separation through parental deportation.

In this form of research, van Manen argues it is the essence that needs to be revealed. He ascertains that “phenomenology is the systematic attempt to uncover and describe the internal meaning structures, of lived experience” (van Manen, 1990, p. 10). Furthermore, van Manen believed that the essence, “that which makes some ‘thing’ what it is (van Manen, 1990, p. 10) can be described in language when the description ‘reawakens the intensity’ of the experience in a deeper manner.

In his writings, van Manen draws upon Heidegger’s concept of “being-in-the-world.” Being-in-the-world refers to the way in which humans live, interact, and engage with the world. Likewise, van Manen highlighted that to know the world is to be in the world and that as researchers it is critical for us to immerse ourselves in the world of our
participants to whatever extent possible. This form of phenomenology aims to bring the reader into an intimate journey of participants’ life world (experience of lived time, lived space, lived body, and lived human relation). Scholar van Manen emphasizes that to do, hermeneutic phenomenology “is to attempt to accomplish the impossible: to construct a full interpretive description of some aspect of the lifeworld, and yet to remain aware that life is always more complex than an explication of meaning can reveal” (van Manen, 1990, p. 18). In his book, van Manen addresses the daunting task of illuminating the essence of participant’s life-world by reinforcing the importance for researchers to engage in the project with much rigor.

According to van Manen, phenomenology is unlike any other inquiry of research because it is a poetizing activity. It is a poetizing activity because it “tries an incantative, evocative speaking, a primal telling, wherein we aim to involve the voice in an original singing of the world” (p.13). This poetizing process allows researchers to truly submerse themselves in a form of description known as interpretive description. Just how a poem cannot be summarized without compromising pieces of its essence, it is true that a participants experience cannot be summarized, edited, modified or deleted without compromising the bare essence of their life-world. Through this process, van Manen shares that poetized research is when the language authentically speaks the world rather than abstractly using language to summarize the world.

In the tradition of hermeneutic phenomenology, bracketing is an important method used to minimize the injection of hypothesizes questions or personal experiences. In his work van Manen describes bracketing as “the act of suspending one’s various beliefs in the reality of the natural world in order to study the essential structures of the
world” (van Manen, 1990, p. 175). Because our biases cannot be held in isolation, researchers learn how to monitor and explore their own biases, thoughts and feelings through journaling and processing with an internal auditor. Likewise, van Manen (1990) ascertains that it is critical to acknowledge and process those biases so that adequate energy can be spent on the interpretation of the essence of these lived experiences.

**Role of the Researcher**

As a researcher and clinician, I was guided by the work of van Manen (1990) which focused on the illumination of lived experiences which is a process that includes co-creation and subjectivity. Creswell (1998) believes that qualitative researchers are interpretive descriptors that are “involved in a sustained and intensive experience with participants” (p. 184). Like Creswell (1998) I also believe that it is imperative for qualitative researchers to reflect on their own biases, beliefs and process, and how those biases impact the development of their study. Therefore, I believe that my role as the researcher is to give the space for a lived experience to be shared uninterrupted and without judgment to the best of my ability and for that story to be told without a marginalized lens.

Because of the sensitivity of the topic one of my concerns was whether my interviewees would feel comfortable revisiting their experience and whether they would feel that they can trust me with their story. I was concerned that they would not share their complete story with me because Latinos from immigrant families typically learn at a young age not to talk about issues of the family in general and even less about deportation and documentation status with outsiders. To help address this I reviewed confidentiality with participants before the interview began and reminded them that they
can decide not to continue at anytime and without any consequences. I have decided that during the interview process I would initiate conversations about immigration. I shared with my participants that I am a Central American Latina researcher who suspects that there are a lot of untold and important stories that need to be shared with others so that clinicians can gain a better idea of the complicated lives that many Latinos living in the U.S. experience.

My second concern was in regards to how my own biases and life experiences might get in the way of my participants’ processes. As I thought about my research topic and the ways that I am personally and emotionally connected to it I could not help but believe that these ideas and feelings would impact my conceptualization of the study. Being a Latina researcher it is my hope to connect with my Latino participants and share their stories accurately and with dignity. As I thought about the interviewing and data analysis process I could not help but think about the important individuals in my life that had similar experiences related to immigration and how those experiences impacted their lives.

Although I have an inner connection with the Latino community I am also aware that there are unique characteristics that I bring to the experience that may pose a barrier or strength in the relationship. I know that when thinking about entering the U.S. illegally I have difficulty not acknowledging that by law it is a crime. I feel like I understand many of the valid reasons that individuals have for wanting to come into the U.S. but I also believe that undocumented parents need to take responsibility for ways that they put themselves and children at risk or in danger. These have been biases that I have had to continue to process and explore with my advisor as the study progressed. As I think about
my similarities (being first generation Latina with immigrant parents) I cannot help but also consider my differences (being an Afro-Latina, having an advanced education, and economically privileged). As I moved forward in the process of the document I intended to continue to pay a considerable amount of attention to how I took the necessary precautions to allow my participants to share their stories with dignity and respect. It is also my hope to be transparent and to document my ideas and biases as they develop in this document.

**Sampling and Selection**

In phenomenology the essence of each shared human experience is what a researcher hopes to reveal (van Manen, 1990; Creswell, 1998). Therefore for this study I used a purposeful criteria sample (Creswell, 1998). Participants in this study were Latinos living in California and were required to meet the following criteria in order to participate in this study:

1. Participants must be living in the U.S legally (i.e., via permanent residency, work visa, student visa, naturalized citizenship).
2. Participants must have at least one parent that entered the U.S. illegally.
3. Participants should be between the ages of 18-30 at the time of the interview.
4. Participants should have an undocumented Latino parent that was deported and then later returned to the U.S. to be reunified with participant. Participants need to have stayed behind in the U.S. when undocumented parent was deported.
5. Participants should be able to recall the incidence of their mother’s or father’s deportation along with the periods preceding and following.
6. Participants should be English speaking. Participants for this study were recruited through word of mouth and advertisement with community leaders. A community leader was identified as anyone that people in the community felt was trustworthy. Some of my community leaders were church members, store owners, or women that were considered keepers of the community. These individuals shared with potential participants that I was safe and that my intentions were good. Only through support of these community leaders did individuals in my target population start to take interest in my research. When I established contact with potential participants who expressed an interest in the study, I described its purpose and the requirements that they would need to meet. Participants were selected through purposeful sampling. It was critical that all participants were in residing the U.S. legally because I wanted to reduce any risks, as I would not be protected from any legal subpoena related to their legal status. Participants were informed of this in conversation during the selection process were reminded when given the informed consent. The sample size was guided by saturation of the information being shared (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data Collection

All interviews were conducted face to face. The interviews were approximately an hour to an hour and a half long. When given to do the interview at an office rental space or at their place of residence, all participants preferred the latter. All interviews were conducted in a confidential space in the house. I used the interview process as an opportunity to also jot notes and ideas that I used to further explore during the data analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). During the interview process, I asked for clarification when I did not understand something and made efforts to ensure that participants were
being represented accurately (Creswell, 1998). The questions asked during the interview were guided by five themes: 1) non-directional, 2) open-ended, 3) evolving, 4) restated the purpose of the study in more specific terms, and 5) invited narratives of multiple variables (Creswell, 1998; van Manen, 1990). The questions were guided by phenomenology inquiry in that they created a conversational environment that allowed interviewees to share their lived experience with a rich description that illuminated the intensity and essence of the experience (van Manen, 1990). Because this was the first study of its kind I wanted to use questions that would reveal the phenomenon itself while highlighting each participant’s unique experience.

In this study I intended to create space for stories to be shared and for participants to explore how the experiences of deportation have impacted their lives. The interviews were semi-structured and were guided by a few specific questions that were intended to stimulate multifaceted thoughts and feelings. The interviews were recorded by audio tape and later transcribed word for word by a transcriptionist. Participant’s names were not transcribed to maintain confidentiality.

Data Analysis

In this study data was conducted using van Manen’s (1990) guidelines. In phenomenology data analysis includes the examination of interactions that take place moment to moment and the exploration of the deeper meanings that are identified within an experience. In doing so, the researcher is able to experience the essence of another persons’ lived experience. The interviews are not recorded for the sole purpose of transcription but should be seen as “narrative material that may serve as a resource” for understanding the essence of a human phenomenon (van Manen, 1990, p. 66). We are all
capable of sharing the essence of an experience because an experience is something that is automatic. However, van Manen (1990) does point out that accessing those deeper felt feelings can be difficult. Although a tedious task, van Manen (1990) believed that “reflective determination and explication of meaning” is essential if one is to grasp the complexity and richness that lay within a phenomenon (p. 155).

Lived experiences are complex and consist of rich themes that collectively produce the essence of an experience. Each theme overlaps with the other which reveals data during various phases of collection. Once the data has been collected, description, interpretation, and theme analysis are essential methods to extract experiences in a phenomenological inquiry. According to van Manen (1990), “Theme analysis refers then to the process of recovering the themes” (p. 78). Phenomenological themes are the evidenced of multifaceted experience. When done well a reader should be able to read a study and find that the themes are able to provide the multiple pieces that produce the essence of an experience. Themes draw the reader in, so that the core experience is more accessible, leaving room for discovery (van Manen, 1990).

In this research project, interviews were transcribed by a trained transcriber shortly after the interviews are completed. During the interview I took notes that could be reviewed later to add to the information provided by the transcription. Having interviews transcribed by a transcriptionist shortly after they were conducted and taking notes during the interviews helped me reduce the effects of forgetfulness and enhance my experience of bracketing, as they kept my personal biases and feelings fresh (van Manen, 1990) and allowed me to process and reflect on the interview experience while data was still being collected.
Once all the audio taped interviews were transcribed, I began the process of teasing a part the various themes. According to van Manen (1990) there were three approaches to identifying themes. In this research project, I used the selective highlighting approach. When phenomenological researchers use this approach they listen to and read a text several times and ask themselves what phrases seem essentially useful in describing an experience (van Manen, 1990).

In my research I asked myself which statements particularly captured the understanding of the impact of parent-child separation through deportation from my participants’ experiences. Once I identified these statements, they were highlighted and grouped into categories. These underlying grouped meanings developed preliminary themes that were used to identify each participant’s perception and experience of parental separation through deportation. As these preliminary themes were revealed, I went back to the original transcripts and checked the themes against the overall interview. I then asked myself again if these themes represent and reflect my understanding of the essence of an adult Latino’s experience of childhood parent-child separation through deportation. I also tracked these themes against my bracketing notes to prevent my ideas from penetrating into the themes.

At the heart of phenomenological reflection is the interaction of the participants’ descriptions of their lived experiences and the researcher’s depth of comprehension of those lived experiences (van Manen, 1990). Because I wanted to accurately reflect these lived experiences I bracketed my feelings and biases throughout the data collection and data analysis process. By bracketing I was able to experience a greater sense of awareness of my thoughts, feelings and interpretation of the experiences that my
participants shared. Writing in my journal and processing with my internal auditor about my bias has proven to be helpful.

Because of my close connection to the population being interviewed, I found it extremely helpful to be able to bracket my thoughts and feelings throughout the development of this study. Bracketing helped me acknowledge my own beliefs by putting them down on paper, but it also allowed me to remain open and present to the stories that I heard because I was aware that these stories were valid and meaningful. I was unable to remain completely separated from participants’ stories, especially when they spoke about the experience of parental separation, as I too experienced that as a child. However, regular conversations with various individuals and maintaining a journal helped me bracket my internal process and permitted me and my advisor or peers to explore any misrepresentation made from my participants’ stories.

After themes have been identified, van Manen (1990) believed that it was good practice to contact the participants and consult with them to ensure their experiences would be represented accurately and collaboratively. This process of contacting participants to consult with them regarding identified themes is referred to as member check. Following the development of themes, all of the participants were contacted via email and provided with an attachment of the preliminary themes. They were invited to follow up later with a phone conversation regarding their ideas on the themes. Six out of the 10 participants were interested in contributing their input at this phase of the analysis, and they provided feedback during our next conversations. Three of the six participants said that the themes were an accurate representation and shared their excitement of being part of a study that gave voice to the experience of deportation. They wanted to know
when it would be published and when would they be able to have a copy to share with their loved ones. I shared with them that I was very much in the preliminary stages of analyzing the data and that it would be quite some time before I knew about findings and publication. However, I did share with them that I would be more than happy to give them a final copy when completed.

My conversation with the other three participants was more about reconfirming confidentiality. These three participants each asked me if theirs or their family members’ real names would be in the document or if their current addresses or descriptions of their current neighborhoods would be published in the document. They shared that while they still wanted their interviews to be used in the study, they just wanted to make sure their identities would be safe. Their concerns were validated and they received reconfirmation that identifying information would not be used in the study. Their feedback was added back into the data analysis process to include new thoughts and feelings.

I intended to incorporate the collaborative support in my writing and data analysis. For my document I used an internal auditor, my advisor Dr. Mona Mittal, to clarify any misinterpretation and assist in the development of the study. Dr. Timothy Baiam, who is familiar with the Latino and immigrant community in California, agreed to act as my peer debriefer. According to van Manen (1990) it is important to share the development of one’s document with advisors, reviewers, and peers as a way to clarify and strengthen the work (p. 100). Put more poetically, van Manen referred to this collaborative analysis as what Socrates called talking with friends. In his analogy, van Manen states that, “friends do not make the other weak; in contrast, friends aim to bring out strength” (p. 100). And with that perspective van Manen stresses the importance for
sharing and collaborating one’s work as it unfolds. As themes started to be “examined, articulated, re-interpreted, omitted, added or reformatted” (van Manen, p.100) they ultimately were kept with the agreement of the participants, auditor, and researcher.

**Conclusion**

This study was guided by the tradition of phenomenological inquiry. It was my goal to study and better understand the impact of deportation on immigrant Latino families in Southern California. The purpose of this study was to explore the impact that deportation has on relationships, specifically on Latino families living in California. Participants were all over the age of eighteen, and were residents of Southern California. Data analysis reflected the work of van Manen’s (1990) research and analysis approach. Throughout the research process I bracketed my thoughts and feelings and also collaborated with my participants, peer debriefer, and internal auditor to maintain credibility and dependability. Chapter four will cover the results of this study.
Chapter IV

Results

This chapter presents data on parental deportation and its impact on the parent-child relationship among the Southern Californian Latino population. The chapter begins with a description of the epoche of the researcher and a brief introduction of the participants in the study. Next, the data is presented and organized in seven categories: 1) relationship with deported parent, 2) nature and dynamics of deportation, 3) deportation’s impact on self, 4) impact on deported parent, 5) impact on relationship with deported parent, 6) relationship with non-deported parent, and 7) impact on other family members. Categories, central ideas around which several themes could be grouped, have been organized into themes and sub-themes consisting of beliefs, ideas, experiences, or perception shared by at least two or more participants.

Epoche of the Researcher

In qualitative research, researchers are required to track their own biases, emotional responses to the data, and personal reactivity in order to keep their subjectivity to a minimum and to increase the level of confirmability of their findings (van Manen, 2007; Creswell, 1998). I bracketed my feelings, thoughts, and reactions as I collected data for this study. I keep my journal at the end of each interview, taking special care to document the moments during the interview where I had a strong emotional reaction. In processing my experiences of the interviews, I also documented things that I found interesting and that piqued my curiosity and challenged my level of openness. Doing so allowed me to analyze my own biases and expectations and to determine how they were
shaping my interviews. In each assumption or strong reaction I tried to locate myself back to a place of curiosity.

I became interested in my research topic when I read about immigrant parents who had been deported being reunified with their children. This brief news clipping led to dialogues with family and friends about immigration as well as deportation. During these conversations I learned about my friends’ bonds with their deported parents and how their relationship had been impacted because of parental deportation. I realized that there were similar themes in the stories I heard, and that there were unique thoughts and feelings in each story as well. As I considered these similarities and differences amongst my friends, who were from the same community and had similar backgrounds, I become curious about the impact of parent-child separation through parental deportation on other members in the Latino community.

During my first interview, I remember feeling that my participant was not sharing her emotions with me; I would ask a question and she would answer it perfunctorily but without elaboration. I was particularly struck by how she spoke of her mother’s 4:00 a.m. capture by immigration officers. It was as if she were reciting the day’s lunch menu. When I asked a few more feeling questions in an attempt to give her the opportunity to elaborate on how she felt, she responded with general feelings like “happy” or “sad.”

When I looked at my notes from our conversation and listened to the interview again on tape I realized that although I was looking for feelings words, she had been giving me her feelings through her story. As I reflect more about this interview, I realized that the participant’s form of emotion through story and my concern of the lack thereof were both subjective interpretations. It was during this interview that it occurred to me
that subjectivity is embedded in our various life and family experiences, our cultural context, and our perspectives on issues related to deportation and immigration. These factors led me to consider some of my participant’s other characteristics. She had a “different” accent and stated that Spanish was her first language. She was currently a permanent U.S. resident but still maintained her Guatemalan citizenship. She also shared that her mother did not drive and did not speak English very well so she had to go everywhere with her mother. Although our life experiences have been very different we are both very much shaped by our language, citizenship status, level of independence, and the level of our parent’s independence. The interview process helped me recognize the unique and meaningful differences that my participants had from my experiences of being a Latina living in the U.S. with immigrant parents.

As I considered how both of our realities could co-exist I had to think of realities as fluid continuums guided and molded by our context and life experiences. With that said, hearing these stories revealed that within the complexities of parent-child separation through deportation, there are other stories that are simultaneously being told. It was important to hear and understand all the pieces related to this experience. It was critical to understand that the phenomenon I wanted to explore was intertwined with other experiences that were valid and added to the richness of the experience of parent-child separation through deportation.

When participants contacted me and shared interest in participating in the study, I was excited. However, after the third interview I went from being excited that the participants were willing to share their stories to feeling humbled as I witnessed the retelling of the story of their lives. Several contacted me following the interviews and
shared that they had gone back to and spoken with their parents about how deportation had impacted their relationship. I was glad to hear that some participants felt the interview was a healing or empowering experience and I was excited that some were moved to reconnect with their parents around their feelings and experiences.

Each interview was different and various feelings were expressed or felt in the room; many times I sat in silence as participants spoke about or grieved over their feelings of confusion, anger, shame, and injustice. One participant cried continuously throughout the interview and afterwards shared that she was surprised that she had so felt so much pain about her father’s deportation. I was able to be present for her during the interview and realized that the stories being shared were impacting me at a deeper emotional level that needed to be addressed. Throughout data collection I thought about how my own experiences with parental separation were impacting this process. I grew up with a father in the Marine Corps who would leave on military missions for anywhere from a couple of weeks to a little over a year. Each time he left it was always a little scary. Sometimes I would cry myself to sleep and wonder when my father would return. Although these sad times of separation took place years ago, I know they are still with me. During the interviews I tried to be aware of my own separation anxieties and how they were filtering the interview process. I was also acutely mindful of how I acted on those anxious feelings.

After a couple of interviews I found myself having internal dialogs about interactions that I witnessed in my everyday life. I would see the border patrol on my way to work and feel torn about two realities that seemed so difficult to hold simultaneously. I held the pre-existing message from the U.S. government that the purpose of the border
patrol was to keep our borders safe from terrorism and drugs. But I was also more aware of another reality, one that resulted in parental separation, confusion, and pain. I wondered if one message was any truer than the other.

One interview in particular really挑战ed me and revealed some feelings within me that I was not aware of. During an interview a participant stated that deportation is just wrong altogether and it was not right that people were treated like criminals. To my surprise, my knee-jerk internal response was, “But they are criminals…entering the country illegally is against the law.” As the participant continued I began to have feelings that made me wonder where I actually stood on legal issues related to deportation. I think I have always avoided a definitive position, choosing to focus on the micro (relationship/community) parts of deportation and stay away from the macro (government/legislation) piece. The notion that international borders should be open and it should not be a crime to cross those borders without documentation made me confront some of my ambiguity.

I left that interview feeling somewhat unsure of my ability to really understand someone’s feelings about deportation and its impact the family (micro) if there was some disagreement on how I believed the system should be regulated (macro). I felt conflicted as I thought about my own friends, how they entered the country as undocumented citizens, and what I would believe to be an appropriate form of correction if they were confronted by an immigration officer. I thought about all the lives that would be impacted by my friends being deported and how that action would change their lives.

This participant’s story pushed me to take a look at my own conflicting views and feelings that are related to this topic. The experience allowed to me sit with the
complexity of this matter, which I had not anticipated prior to the interview. I was assisted through this process by regular conversations with my advisor about the stories that were being explored and analyzed. This helped me remain aware of my own views and feelings related to deportation. The interviews and conversations with my peers and advisor validated my sense of confliction as it became very apparent that deportation and issues related to it were complicated by nature. I continued the interviews while remaining mindful of my own ideas and accepting both the complexity of the issue and the fact that my views on the matter would change with new experiences and relationships.

Although it was helpful to gain this greater understanding I understood that I needed additional support during the remainder of my dissertation process. I sought support from my own community and found ways to get and give what I needed. I asked my family for support and made an effort to spend more time in fellowship with others from my church. I also prayed more and asked for wisdom and support as I went through a process that was new to me and would impact many people. These actions and behaviors increased my ability to stay centered, relaxed, and engaged even during the most intense parts of the interview process. With regard to giving to my community I mobilized my sadness and organized a mini-food and clothes drive for children in two Mexican orphanages. Giving in this way helped me connect more with some of the injustice and pain that was shared by some participants and allowed me to develop new relationships with individuals with diverse perspectives on deportation-related issues. The combination of getting my needs met from my community and giving back to my
community assisted me in being present during my interview process and in being sensitive, curious, and non-judgmental.

**Participants**

Ten individuals participated in this study. Participants’ ages ranged from 23-36 with an average age of 29. Five participants were born in the U.S. (four in California and one in Texas) and five outside the U.S. (three in Mexico and two in Guatemala). All participants’ parents were born outside the U.S. The ethnic backgrounds of the participants were: Mexican (7), Guatemalan (2), and Salvadorian (1). At the time of the interview the participants were residents of San Diego, California. In terms of relationship status three were married, two were in long-term relationships, two were divorced, two were single, and one was engaged. At the time of the interview, five participants were living with their parents and five were living independently. Five participants had their own children, ages 6-15. When asked about religious orientation, six participants identified themselves as “believing in God,” two as Catholics, and two as Christians. With regard to sexual orientation, two identified themselves as homosexuals and eight as heterosexuals.

In assigning pseudonyms to the participants, I have used the names of characters from the 2009 movie “Sin Nombre,” which translates to “without a name.” I selected names from this movie because it is about undocumented individuals that take the dangerous journey from Mexico, Guatemala, and El Salvador to the U.S. In the film some people die, some are robbed, some are separated from each other, and ultimately, a few make it across to “the land of opportunity.” A major theme in the film is the great risks individuals take in order to come to the U.S. I believe this is an appropriate way to
capture the significance of my participants’ experiences. Below, I present a brief background and family history narrative for each participant.

**Karla Cecelia Alvarado**

Karla is a bilingual 25-year old female. She is originally from Jutiapa, a small city in Guatemala, and she came to the U.S. at the age of seven. Karla shared that her mother was deported when she was nine years old. She was separated from her mother for six months and she stayed in the U.S. with her father and older brother. After six months Karla was reunited with her mother and they lived together with the family.

When asked to talk about her mother’s deportation Karla shared that it was completely unexpected. She reported that immigration and customs officers came to her residence at 4 or 5 am. They entered her home and asked everyone to step outside onto the sidewalk. The officers gave very little information as to what they were doing or why they were there. When the officers identified her mother, they placed her in handcuffs and took her in what looked like a police vehicle. Karla shared that by that time everyone was in tears, trying to understand what had just happened.

**Marco Antonio Aguirre**

Marco, a 26-year old laboratory employee of a local hospital, came to the U.S. from Guatemala City with his family when he was 9 years old. Marco shared that his mother was deported when he was 12 years old. He was separated from his mother for six months and he stayed in the U.S. with his father and younger sister. When six months passed Marco was reunited with his mother and resumed life with his family in California.
When asked to talk about his mother’s deportation Marco shared that he remembered people pounding the door and yelling, while inside his home was scared and fearful of opening the door. When his father finally answered the door, immigration and customs officers wanted to speak to his parents and search the house. Marco believed it must have been around 5 a.m. because it was still dark out. He was scared as the officers took his mom and drove off. Marco said that he did not understand what was going on and that his father was too upset to explain where the officers were taking his mother.

Diana Garcia

Diana is a 28-year old Mexican American woman who was living with her parents when we met. Diana’s mother was deported when she was 11 years old. She was separated from her mother for nine months and she stayed in the U.S. with her father and two younger siblings. When Karla was 12 years old and was reunited with her mother and lived together with her family in California.

When asked to talk about her mother’s deportation Diana shared that she did not know understand why they came to take her mother. However, after the deportation her father explained that her mother had received a letter from the U.S. government identifying her as undocumented and giving her 6 months to leave the U.S. voluntarily without penalty before being deported by immigration and customs officers back to Mexico. Diana’s mother did not leave because her younger daughter had health issues and she wanted to continue her treatment in the U.S. Diana shared that when she came home from school one afternoon her father told her that officers had come to the house to take her mother, who was being detained and would be sentenced to be deported back to
Mexico. Diana was very upset and devastated because she had no idea that when she
came home from school that day, her mother would be gone for the next nine months.

**Leonardo Alonso**

A 27-year old Mexican American male, Leonardo was divorced and living with
his mother and four siblings at the time of the interview. Leonardo’s father was deported
when he was ten years old. He was separated from his father for one year and stayed in
the U.S. with his mother and four siblings. When the year passed Leonardo was reunited
with his father and lived together with his family.

When asked to talk about his father’s deportation Leonardo shared that it was
―crazy, like on the TV!‖ From the living room window Leonardo saw his father and a
friend running through the apartment complex trying to get away from the immigration
and customs officers. He remembered his father breaking the window to get into the
house while Leonardo just stood there in shock. He thought that everything was going to
be fine but when he saw the neighbor tell the officers what house his father had entered,
he knew they would find him. The officers entered in the same window and arrested his
father. Leonardo remembered his father saying that everything was going to be okay. He
recalled that one of the officers wanted to take Leonardo as well but was overruled. As
his father was taken away Leonardo shared that he remembered all the glass on the floor
and people screaming.

**Rosalba Belen Barron**

Rosalba is a 30-year old Mexican American woman. At the time of the interview
she had been married for six years and was a stay-at-home mother of four. Rosalba
shared that her mother was deported when she was seven years old. She was separated
from her mother for seven months and she stayed in the U.S. in foster care. She recalled that her father visited her 2-3 times during those seven months, after which, at eight years old, Rosalba was reunited with her deported mother and resumed living with her mother, father, and siblings.

When asked to talk about her mother’s deportation Rosalba disclosed that she remembered the incident as if it had happened the day before. She was in the grocery store with her mother and father when the immigration and customs officers raided the grocery store. She remembered everyone running all over the place and her mother holding her hand tight while her father ran in the opposite direction to avoid capture. As a result, Rosalba was placed in foster care during her mother’s deportation and was visited by her father a handful of times until she was returned to her parents’ care.

**Marcela Feregrino**

Marcela, a bilingual 36-year old Mexican American woman, lives with one of her three children and her female partner of five years. At the time of the interview Marcela worked at a local hospital and a manufacturing company. Marcela’s father was deported at a difficult time for the family because just a couple of months earlier Marcela had lost her mother to a brain aneurysm. Marcela shared that her father was deported when she was 13 years old. She was separated from him for 18 months and bounced around among extended family members in the U.S. After 18 months Marcela was reunited with her father and lived off and on with him.

When asked to talk about her father’s deportation Marcela remembered that he had been pulled over by a traffic officer for speeding and was then detained when it was revealed that he was undocumented. Marcela said that the judge let her father stay in the
U.S. for her mother’s funeral but several days later he was sent back to Mexico. During this time Marcela was unable to speak with her father and was told days after the funeral that he had been deported back to Mexico. Marcela admitted that at the time she did not really understand what being deported meant but she did understand that her father was not there.

**Juan Pablo Arian Barron**

A 29-year old catalog product salesman, Juan Pablo is a proud father of a 6-year old daughter of whom he has 50% custody. At the time of the interview, he was “in between living situations” and staying with his mother, although he had plans to live on his own sometime in the future. Juan’s father was deported when he was twelve years old. He was separated from him for a year and stayed in the U.S. with his mother and younger siblings. When reunited with his father, Juan lived with him and the family thereafter.

When asked to talk about his father’s deportation Juan shared that it came with no warning. He stated that “immigration officers came in the house” and took his father. Juan stated that it happened very quickly and without question or explanation. Juan shared that he remembered everyone was crying when they drove off with his father. When his father was deported, Juan Pablo shared that he was secretly excited because he knew it meant his father would not be able to hit his mother anymore.

**Paulina Gaitan**

At the time of the interview Paulina, a 28-year old divorced Mexican American woman, had moved back in with her mother and siblings after a 9-month marriage ended in divorce. Paulina was seven years old when her father was deported. She was separated
from father for one year and stayed in the U.S. with her mother and four siblings. When Paulina was finally reunited with her father, she had already turned eight.

Paulina talked about her father’s deportation and shared that it was completely unexpected. She said, “It was like one day he was there and everything was normal and the next day it was as if he never existed.” Paulina described her father’s deportation as a painful and difficult experience that affected her and everyone in the family. During the last five years Paulina has slowly begun to reconnect with her father, an ex-drug user with a history of abuse who now lives in Mexico. Although not emotionally ready to discuss her upsetting memories and feelings with him, she was interested in a relationship with her father that focused on the present and not on the past.

Gabriela Garibaldi

Gabriela is a 33-year old Mexican American mother of two children ages 6 and 12. Married for 12 years, Gabriela is a stay-at-home mother and a full-time student. Gabriela’s father was deported when she was 9 years old. Gabriela was sent to stay at her aunt’s house for a few days before she was finally told that her father had been deported back to Mexico. She had a difficult time understanding what that meant and recalled asking her aunt every few months when her father was going to come back home. A self-described “daddy’s girl,” Gabriela felt her world had been taken away during her separation from her father. A year and a half later Gabriela was reunited with her father but by then she was already 11 years old. During the separation she stayed with extended family and shared that she had a difficult time adjusting when her father returned.

Felipe Castro
Felipe Castro is a 32-year old Salvadorian American man. At the time of the interview he was single, lived alone, and worked full time. Although his parents lived a couple of cities away, Felipe described his relationship with them as “very close” and shared that he spoke to them often. When he was a 15 years old, Felipe’s mother was deported back to El Salvador and was gone for 18 months. Felipe shared that he was devastated when his mother was deported; he recalled that officers came to the house and simply took her. Because he was a teenager at the time Felipe understood what was happening and feared that he would never see his mother again. During her deportation Felipe stayed in the U.S with his father and siblings.

Felipe shared that 18 months later his mother returned to the U.S., but by that time he was 17 years old and his mother had missed out on some important events in his life that shaped who he was. When his mother returned he was excited but her return after almost two years placed a significant strain on their relationship. Felipe shared that most of their conflicts involved his mother having a difficult time coping with the level of independence to which he had become accustomed to in her absence. Felipe had become close with his father while his mother was gone and even after her return continued to rely on his father.

Findings

The following data presents the experience of parental deportation. Anything stated by two or more participants was considered a theme. The data has been organized into seven categories: 1) relationship with deported parent before separation, 2) nature and dynamics of deportation, 3) deportation’s impact on self, 4) impact on deported
parent, 5) impact on relationship with deported parent, 6) relationship with non-deported parent, and 7) impact on other family members (see Table 1).

Table 1

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Domain: Latino Immigrant Experience of Deportation

Category I: Relationship with Deported Parent before Separation

Theme I: Strong bond.

Theme II: Distant bond.

Category II: Nature and Dynamics of Deportation

Theme I: Deportation was unexpected and sudden.

Theme II: Experience of deportation unraveled with time.

Theme III: The deportation experience was silent and confusing.

Subtheme I: Not allowed to talk.

Subtheme II: Limited explanation and a lot of confusion.

Category III: Deportation’s Impact on Self

Theme I: I was devastated and lonely.

Theme II: I did not want to go home

Theme IV: I tried to forget and concentrate.

Theme V: My experiences differed some based on where I lived during separation from deported parent.

Subtheme I: I lived with the other parent at home.

Subtheme II: I lived with and received help from extended family.

Subtheme III: I lived in foster care.
Category IV: Impact on Deported Parent

Theme I: Emotionally checked out and unstable.

Theme II: Engaging in self-destructive behaviors to cope with the experience of deportation.

Category V: Relationship with Deported Parent upon Reunification

Theme I: Change in level of intimacy

Theme II: No real relationship.

Theme III: I grew up and did not need him/her

Theme VI: Mixed reactions to parent’s attempt to repair relationship.

Category VI: Relationship with Non-Deported Parent

Theme I: Close relationship.

Theme II: More than a single parent.

Theme III: Provided comfort and distraction

Theme I: It changed the whole family.

Theme II: Dynamics within the family shifted.

Theme III: Impact differed based on sibling position.

Category I: Relationship with Deported Parent before Separation

Stories about parental deportation have been organized to include experiences that occurred before the parent’s actual deportation date. Participants highlighted meaningful relational experiences that set the framework of their relationship with their parent and the impact of the deportation. Each meaningful pre-deportation relational experience is
significantly linked with the experience of having the parent deported. Two themes emerged in this category: (1) strong bond and (2) distant bond.

**Theme I: Strong bond.** Five participants discussed the strong bond they had with their deported parent before the deportation. Although participants expressed a strong bond they were also able to express their closeness in different ways. Diana and Paulina used rich metaphors to capture the nuances of their relationship with their parent:

*Diana:* My mom, she has always been there for me. She’s like a pillar in my life. I am attached to the hip. I say that doctors never cut the umbilical cord because we are so attached.

*Paulina:* Well, before the deportation, I knew he was there. You know, that had made me feel secure. That made me feel like, ok, he’s the provider, he’s providing for us.

*Marcela,* Gabriela, and Felipe were able to provide specific examples of what closeness to their parents looked like for them:

*Marcela:* My dad, he worked a lot when I was a kid. I played soccer and my dad and his family always came out to my games and cheered me on and everything. My dad practiced soccer with me, so our relationship was pretty good.

*Gabriela:* I and my dad always had that connection. There was always that bond there between him and I. You can call it “daddy’s little girl.” It was pretty much that kind of bond. We were close; we did things together all the time.

*Felipe:* My sister and I were always close to our mother, very close. We would go to the park, grocery shopping, anything you can think of we would do with our mom.

**Theme II: Distant bond.** Four participants shared that they had a distant relationship with their parent before the deportation took place. Paulina stated that they did not have a close bond to their deported parents because their parents were often
working long hours and thus unavailable. Karla stated that she was less reliant on her mom as a child and wanted her independence, which contributed to a distant bond with her mother. Leonardo shared that her father did not engage in much conversation with him, which contributed to their distant bond:

*Rosalba:* Before [my mom] left, it was alright. She was never home, though. She was always working. We would hardly see her; she left early in the morning. She used to always leave food though, to microwave it, and then I used to just give it to my sister.

*Leonardo:* With my dad it was more like, “go to the store and buy stuff.” And I go to the store and bought it. And, it wasn’t much of a relationship. We never talked. We never talked.

**Category II: Nature and Dynamics of Deportation**

Several participants addressed the complexity of the issue of deportation of undocumented individuals in the U.S. They revealed that deportation is a unique and personal experience and that although the actual deportation typically takes place in a single day, children of deported parents endure a series of subsequent experiences that add to the complexity of the nature and dynamics of parental deportation. Children left behind in the wake of a deportation are left to pick up the pieces of their lives, many times in shock due to the unexpectedness of the deportation, with few answers regarding their parents’ return. It is typically time that slowly reveals residual feelings and an understanding of deportation and how it impacts the parent-child relationship. The main themes that emerged in this category were: 1) deportation was unexpected and sudden; 2) the experience of deportation unraveled with time, and 3) the deportation experience was silent and confusing. Two sub-themes were also identified: a) not allowed to talk and b) limited explanation and a lot of confusion.
Theme I: Deportation was unexpected and sudden. Karla and Leonardo disclosed that their parents’ deportations were unexpected and sudden. Juan specifically discussed his unpreparedness for dealing with his parent’s deportation. Participants detailed having no time for goodbyes; their parents were detained within minutes and they felt they were not given time to process what was taking place:

*Karla:* They came between 4 or 5 in the morning. They knocked and banged on the door. They went through everybody’s room and when we were sitting in the living room and we found out who they were and what they were doing...There were no times to say goodbyes, we really couldn’t. I just started crying because I couldn’t even hug her.

*Leonardo:* There was no warning, nothing like that. This is not the movies, this is totally real life. They just went inside and they took my dad. They took my dad and his friend and I was just there with my mom. The whole thing just happened in a few minutes...There was no time for goodbyes. They arrested them and they took them away whether you’re there or not. Definitely we have no time for goodbyes.

*Juan:* No. No. I don’t think anyone is prepared. I think it just happens...whether you’re prepared or not...It just happens, like an emergency. You’re not prepared for it...And I think even if somebody was to tell me, “Eh, your father’s going to go away on a certain day,” um, I think... I would be like, “Ok, yeah, he’s going to leave, so I better spend more time with him” and what not. But the fact of the matter is that he still was going to be gone. So it wouldn’t - in my opinion, it would just prepare us, just a little bit, not in a big sense, because it was still him missing and not being there. He was still not going to be there so not much difference.

Theme II: Experience of deportation unraveled with time. A child’s understanding of a parent’s deportation can be confusing and incomplete. All of the participants shared their accounts of what that day of parental deportation was like for them to experience; however, four participants were able to reveal some of the impact of deportation long after their parent had been taken away. Marco and Paulina discussed that
some time after their deported parent’s return things started to change. They spoke specifically to a difference in their parents that also changed the relationship. Leonardo spoke about very specific experiences of having to deal with the pain caused by the deportation some years later:

*Marco:* I have to be very careful with what I talk to my mom about. I start walking on ice. I’m not able to talk about immigration; she’s not able to talk about what she went through. I have to be careful where I take her because it might remind her of something she went through when she had to leave and come back. There are just certain places I can’t take her.

*Rosalba:* After [the deportation experience] my life changed so much. It wasn’t the same. Obviously my mom is not the same... a couple years later I found out she actually got raped, that’s why she walks like that. [At the time] I didn’t understand the meaning of that though.

Leonardo spoke about very specific experiences of having to deal with the pain caused by the deportation some years later:

*Leonardo:* Just a few years ago [my father] was staying in Mexico. And we went down there. And he was crying and saying how sorry he was that he wasn’t able to be there for us when we were younger, and he wasn’t there for us when everything happened with my mom… to be able to keep us together. So I know that it was, and still is something that is really heavy on his heart. The deportation was keeping us separate and he wasn’t able to be here and stuff.

**Theme III: The deportation experience was silent and confusing.** Six out of 10 participants discussed some level of silence and confusion surrounding their parents’ deportations. Karla and Juan shared that they had not talked about the experience with their parent:

*Karla:* I haven’t talked about it with my mom. I don’t think she really likes touching that point. It was horrible for her and for everybody else. I haven’t really asked her anything like that.
Juan: We never talked. We really were never good at talking to each other. We never really talked about it him leaving, it affected us a lot.

Subtheme I: Not allowed to talk. Paulina and Felipe gave vivid accounts of being forbidden by adults to talk about their parents’ deportations:

Paulina: We hardly talked about it, we were not allowed to, actually. Our dads forbid us from that, he said, “No” and that we shouldn’t talk about it. We were not allowed to talk about it…whatever happens, happens.

Felipe: We talked about how nice it was for [mom] to be back home, but we never said anything regarding her deportation or how we needed our space because that was something very devastating and anger and sad for her. [We didn’t want] to keep reminding her of what happened or the ugly way they took her.

Subtheme II: Limited explanation and a lot of confusion. Due to the sudden nature of deportation, family members left behind often struggle to get accurate, current information. As the adults try to make sense of everything that is taking place, the children sometimes get lost in the grand scope of things. Parents often have a difficult time knowing what to share and when to share it and as a result end up sharing little to no information regarding the recent separation and loss (Jewett-Jarratt, 1994). Marcela and Gabriela spoke about the limited explanation and information they received about their parents’ deportations. Both identified a sense of confusion and lack of understanding about what had happened to their deported parents and would happen thereafter:

Marcela: I’d hear things from my grandma, and she would say that he had called. His calls were sporadic. She would say that he was doing okay, or he was in a home, or on the street, homeless, or something. So it was just kind of confusing, because you don’t know. I was pretty angry.
Gabriela: [My aunt] told me that [my father] had been deported and I was like, “Well what does that mean?” “What is deported?” “What happened?” and I’m thinking it was something bad, something crazy. But she told me that they just sent him back to México because he wasn’t allowed to be here. That’s all I was told. And so I just didn’t know what to think. I was 9 years old, and I didn’t really understand.”

Category III: Deportation’s Impact on Self

All of the participants discussed how their parents’ deportations had impacted their lives and how they managed while their parents were gone. Themes that emerged from this category were 1) I was devastated and lonely, 2) I did not want to go home, 3) I knew something had changed, 4) I tried to forget and concentrate, and 5) my experiences differed based on where I lived during separation from my deported parent. Sub-themes of this final theme were: a) I lived with other parent at home, b) I lived with and received help from extended family, and c) I lived in foster care.

Theme I: I was devastated and lonely. Six out of 10 participants discussed being clearly impacted by their parents’ deportations. Felipe, Diana, Leonardo, and Paulina discussed the devastation they felt:

Felipe: It was devastating. I was sad and angry because [mom] was gone and my dad or nobody else could do anything about it. I was angry for just the way they took her. They got her like she was a criminal, like she was a murderer… which she wasn’t. It was devastating. You just don’t know how to deal with it…But there were times that I would get sad and start to cry and get real upset because I thought, “Oh man, what’s going to happen if she doesn’t come back? What’s my life going to be like 10 years from now, me not having a mother? How’s that going to affect me in the future?”

Diana: It felt like there was a big piece missing from my life. It was hard not having her here with me. I did everything with my mom. She was a part of my everyday life. It’s was like I was missing an arm or a leg or an eye, something you have to use every day. Because I couldn’t just turn and say, “Oh, hey mom!” and
talk about the day. I felt like the whole world didn’t understand me because that one person was missing from my life.

_Leonardo:_ I felt alone. I felt abandoned. I felt just completely disconnected and robbed because I couldn’t even call because there was no phone to call. There was no address to send a letter. I had no idea if [my dad] was dead or alive there.

Karla and Marco shared their sense of loneliness and feelings of being lost:

_Karla:_ Sometimes I felt lonely, because my mom wasn’t there. There were times I wanted to cry because she was not there. I wasn’t able to talk to anybody, only my dad. But when my dad and aunt weren’t home and had to work I was left alone by myself, it was hard because I was little…I had really bad feelings and couldn’t express it to anybody because I did not want them asking me questions and I didn’t know what I was supposed to say… it was just hard.

**Theme II: I did not want to go home.** Juan and Marcela discussed coping with their parents’ deportations by not going home. Juan specifically stated that he did not want to go home because it reminded him of his parent’s deportation.

_Juan:_ I didn’t want to be home. The family was always there for me, but I’m the type of person that was like, “Okay, home reminded me of [the deportation].” That’s why I never wanted to be home… My friends were always there, or I would always bury myself in books or after school activities and not come home until late.

_Marcela:_ My little sister, she was asking for my dad and she was crying all the time. I remember that. I wasn’t home after school, so I don’t remember talking to my sisters or my other brothers. I don’t remember. I was in the streets.

**Theme III: I knew something had changed.** Karla and Rosalba shared how they understood things had changed when their deported parent had returned to the family:

_Karla:_ It felt good having her back, even though she looked really different. She looked like she went through depression, something had changed. She was skinny and pale… But it was good having her home, finally.

_Rosalba:_ I was happy; I cried, actually, when I saw her, because you’re happy to see your mom again, thinking that you would not see her again. But I remember
she came, and then our social worker took us to McDonald’s and our mom was there, and we ran to her. We were crying and then she told us everything was going be okay. But I knew it wasn’t true. I knew it wasn’t true, you could just tell it in her face.

**Theme IV: I tried to forget and concentrate.** Four of 10 participants discussed the complexity of missing their deported parents while being unsure about their parents’ return. They reported coping with their parents’ absence by trying to forget and concentrate on things that did not make them think so much about the deported parent:

*Paulina: I never talked to anybody about how to deal with it. I just watched TV or go over to my friends’ and try to forget about it, just try to forget that it happened.*

Felipe and Marcela engaged in new activities to help them forget and concentrate on something else:

*Marcela: It affected us in the way that we were like, “Ok, we have a dad, but we know he’s not here. We don’t know if he’s going to come back or not.” We just pushed that to the side and were like, “Okay, we have got to concentrate.”*  

*Felipe: I started playing basketball, which took my time. School and basketball, and I had a girlfriend on the side. I would go out with her on the weekends, and go to the movies once in a while, and spend time with my dad.*

**Theme V: My experiences differed some based on where I lived during separation from deported parent.** Seven of 10 participants discussed that where they lived during the parent’s deportation had some impact on their experience of the deportation. However, there were three participants that did not talk about how where they lived impacted their experience with deportation. Because parents are typically the primary providers for their children, it is likely that after a parental deportation the child would stay with the other parent, be relocated to the household of other relatives, or be
placed in some form of foster care or group home. In this study participants discussed their experiences in each one of these scenarios.

Subtheme I: I lived with the other parent at home. Gabriela and Juan reported that staying with the other parent at home impacted their experience of their parents’ deportations. Although they both acknowledged that their lives were changed because of the deportation, they felt taken care of because they had their immediate family by their side:

Marcela: When my father got deported my mom was left with me and my sister on her own. So she ended up getting welfare, we had Medi-Cal. We were pretty poor. We went from having big meals to eating top ramen and soups. And my mom always made sure that we had a roof over our head and always made sure that we had something to eat, even if it was top ramen. It made a big impact on our lives.

Juan: So [my mom] has inspired me – that was the good thing about growing up… I think the family was always there for me, to listen to, always has been; if I have a problem, they were there to listen.

Subtheme II: I lived with and received help from extended family. Three participants told of an arrangement being made with extended family members during their parents’ deportations. Two participants shared that an aunt moved in, while one lived with different relatives and another participant lived at home but received significant help from extended family:

Karla: Since my aunt was living with us, it wasn’t as hard as other people because she would help in the house; she would cook for us, wash for us, because my dad was always working.

Leonardo: My father comes from a large family and he has a lot of brothers and sisters. So we had aunts or uncles that would help us out. That made a difference in our lives. So when my dad left and we didn’t have anything to eat they would provide for us. So they made a huge difference.
Gabriela: Since I didn’t have my mom and dad, I was bounced around from family to family, and cousins, aunts; staying with everybody. It was kind of hard.

Subtheme III: I lived in foster care. Only one participant, Paulina, reported being forced to live in foster care after parental deportation because border patrol officers did not know where her other parent was living in California:

Rosalba: They just took her and they left us with this lady. I don’t know her name. They took us and brought us to this therapist. I remember she was a therapist because we were young. So they took my mom… [our father] actually did visit us, like 3 or 4 times, and took us some hot chocolate, I remember I thought I wasn’t going to see her again.

Category IV: Impact on Deported Parent

Several participants shared how they witnessed the impact that deportation had on their deported parents. They gave emotional accounts of how their parent’s deportation impaired his or her ability to be fully present in the way they had once been. The deported parents had difficulty coping and transitioning upon reunification with their families, which placed added strain on the parent-child relationship. Two themes emerged from this category: 1) emotionally checked out and unstable, and 2) engaging in self-destructive behaviors to cope with the experience of deportation.

Theme I: Emotionally checked out and unstable. Two participants shared that their deported parents were emotionally “checked out” and unstable upon returning to their families.

Rosalba: She was actually more distant between us. We wanted to be next to her, but there was just always something blocking us that didn’t let us to get close. It’s hard when you’re trying to do something and your mom is trying to do something else. So that separated us a lot.
Gabriela: [Our father] was pretty much emotionally checked out. He wasn’t in any state of mind to be there for me, or be there for my sister, or to be there for anybody. He wasn’t stable enough.

Theme II: Engaging in self-destructive behaviors to cope with the experience of deportation. One participant shared that her father started doing drugs. Another reported that her mother, who was previously caring, became abusive towards the children:

Paulina: My father used so much drugs that I think part of his brain is not even there, to be honest. So I think for him to cope with something, it’d be really difficult, for me to tell him how I feel and him accepting it. I don’t think he’d accept it like a normal person.

Rosalba: Everything was so bad to her. She was screaming at us all the time. And then if something didn’t go her way, she’d spank us. That’s how bad it was. I guess what ever happened over there happened. She wasn’t the same person, she was different. It was not her, though.

Category V: Relationship with Deported Parent upon Reunification

In this category participants described the parent-child relationship upon reunification with their deported parents. In their stories, participants told about longing for their parents’ return only to discover that reunification was not always what they had hoped for. Because of the complexity of the deportation experience, participants reported a loss of the parent-child relationship they had once known. Several themes emerged from this category: 1) change in level of intimacy, 2) no real relationship, 3) I grew up and did not need him/her, and 4) mixed reactions towards parent’s attempt to repair relationship.

Theme I: Change in level of intimacy. Two participants related growing apart from their deported parents during the forced separation, while for three others, the
experience led to development of a closer relationship with the deported parent and an appreciation for that parent’s contribution to the family:

_Gabriela:_ It changed my relationship with him for years. After the years started going by, our bond started to pull apart, and he was gone so much that I didn’t really have a chance to get to know him as I was growing up, he didn’t have a chance to get to know me or see me growing up or my sister, and so we kind of grew apart and it was devastating to me.

_Rosalba:_ She wasn’t the same one, she was just different. It was not her though. I knew it wasn’t her. I think even though she tried to be a mother to us, something was blocking us. Whatever happened, it was blocking us from her.

_Diana:_ We got closer. I’ve always valued my parents. I’ve always appreciated my mom. When people say you don’t know what you have until you lose it… well, I knew what I had. So when my mom came back we became even closer. Happy does not explain it, closer does not explain it. We became the best of friends.

**Theme II: No real relationship.** One participant discussed how her father’s forced deportation made her angry because she felt that he did not try hard enough to come back after being deported. She stated that although she knew he was her father, there was no real relationship. Another participant felt fatherless:

_Paulina:_ I think I was angry about [my dad getting deported]. My anger was towards my dad and it was about what was happening. I think that it affected our relationship. I know he’s still my father, and he knows I’m his daughter, but we don’t really have a relationship.

_Juan:_ I’m not mad at him but it’s like I never got a dad.

**Theme III: I grew up and did not need him/her.** Two participants discussed feeling they no longer needed their parents once the parents returned. One told of his mother wanting to be with him all the time when she returned although he felt differently.
Another shared similar thoughts about her father and added that she was in a tough place by the time he returned.

*Felipe:* I grew up. I wasn’t a child anymore; I didn’t need her as much as I did when I was younger. It [our relationship] wasn’t as close anymore because we weren’t spending as much time together as when I was younger. And I wasn’t needy, but she was needy. She was afraid of being deported again and not being able to see her family… She just wanted me and my sister to be with her all the time after school but we couldn’t now, because I played basketball, and I had my girlfriend on the side. It was very difficult for us to spend time together as we did when we were younger.

*Marcela:* My dad was gone, it was rough. When I saw him a few years later, in that time when he came back, I was already doing my thing. I was using drugs and then I became involved with a man and got pregnant at a young age and I was just a mess.

**Theme IV: Mixed reactions to parent’s attempt to repair relationship.** Two participants identified times when their deported parents would try to repair the relationship, which would bring up various feelings. Juan shared that he felt no different from his father’s attempt to express his remorse, while for Gabriela, a father’s expression of remorse brought a desire that he would forget about the past and be more in the present:

*Juan:* He told me he apologized, he said “I love you,” but for me nothing changed. Nothing changed. It was like any words.

*Gabriela:* When we talked about it and when he told me, “I’m sorry, I should’ve been there for you, you were my responsibility and I wasn’t.” I think ever since then when he’s here, he’s been trying to make it up to me, and make it up to me, and make it up to me. I feel like he doesn’t need to make it up to me anymore. It’s the here now, and that’s all that matters. We talked about it a few times, and I know he really regrets stuff.
Category VI: Relationship with Non-Deported Parent

As participants related some of the difficulties of having a parent deported they also revealed new and positive interactions that took place with the parent that stayed behind. They were able to recognize that their parents’ deportations were a significant stressor in their lives and yet see how the parent that stayed helped provide a level of support that might not have been there before. Three themes emerged from this category: 1) close relationship, 2) more than a single parent, and 3) provided comfort and distraction.

Theme I: Close relationship. Two participants shared that their relationship with their non-deported parent got closer. One reported that her relationship with her non-deported parent remained close throughout the entire experience of the deportation, while another asserted that his relationship with the non-deported parent actually became closer than it was before the deportation:

*Felipe:* My relationship with my father got closer; he was able to share his emotions and we were able to talk to him like son to father and daughter to father. Before we never had that chance, it was a blessing in a way, that our relationship with our father became better than before.

Theme II: More than a single parent. For two participants showed appreciation for their non-deported parent and shared that their non-deported parent functioned at a level above that of single parent:

*Juan:* My mom was really more than the mother; she was the one that would take care of us, or the one that would get us ready for school. I mean she worked really hard.

*Leonardo:* My mom was more like a wise person. You know she always helped me with everything, any question. I would ask a question and she would have the right answer.
Theme III: Provided comfort and distraction. Two participants discussed how their non-deported parent comforted them and distracted them from the fear and uncertainty of their deported parents return. One participant shared that when she worried her father (non-deported parent) would take her [out] to distract her. The second participant shared that his father (non-deported parent) would comfort him when he cried for his mother’s return. Both participants shared that their non-deported parent would tell the participants that their deported parent would be home soon.

Karla: My dad kept saying, “Everything is going to be okay, your mom’s going to be home soon… your mom’s going to be home soon, so you got nothing to worry about.” When we worried, he took us out so he could distract us.

Felipe: During that time my dad did his best. He would try to comfort us if we were crying, he’d say, “It’s going to be fine, your mom’s going to be back sooner that you know it.”

Category VII: Impact on Other Family Members

Deportation is typically an unexpected and quick experience that leaves the family behind to pick up the pieces. Participants detailed the challenges that deportation placed on the family unit and how deportation played out as the family attempted to process unexpected loss and separation. Three themes emerged from this category: 1) it changed the whole family, 2) dynamics within the family shifted, and 3) impact differed based on sibling position.

Theme I: It changed the whole family. Two participants shared that their parents’ deportation changed the entire family, and one felt that each member of the family had a different way of coping.
Paulina: So I don’t think anybody should go through that because it made the whole family change and the whole thing flip up from the bottom to the top. So I think they shouldn’t go through that.

**Theme II: Dynamics within the family shifted.** Two participants discussed the shifting dynamics of the family as a result of parental deportation. One participant relayed that older siblings began to take care of the younger siblings because their father was gone. The second participant detailed having to take on an adult role and make sure that her siblings did her homework. These changes felt like a burden:

Juan: My brothers were always taking care of the younger ones… I saw my mom work really hard, and so I started helping her out, like with school stuff and cleaning the house. My mom paid for everything; she overworked herself, and worked 5-7 days a week. She took care of the household and so did my brothers.

Diana: I had to be the grown up. I had to be the woman figure and be the one helping with the homework… it placed a burden on me. Now that I am older I see that I am not alone. I know other people that go through that and my heart just goes out to them because it makes them grow up fast.

**Theme III: Impact differed based on sibling position.** Six of 10 participants discussed the impact of the deportation on their siblings. Five participants felt that their younger siblings had it harder because they expressed a lot of anger and did not understand why their parents had been deported. One participant felt that the experience was harder on her than her siblings because she was older and really saw what was going on.

Marco: With my little sister it was harder because she was younger. I was older than her by a few years older and I guess it was a little bit harder for her. She wasn’t able to eat, and I was doing just fine, because I knew she was going to come back. But it was hard on her I would say.
**Diana:** Well, I had to be the grown up. I had to be there. I had to be the woman figure. And be the one helping with the homework. It places a burden. I can imagine my siblings went through similar emotions being younger; but I was the older one, I’m the one that can reason, understand better. They can’t so they were angry when my mom got deported, especially my brother. They were angry a lot of the time.

**Paulina:** They were younger than me. So I think it was kind of hard for them to actually understand what happened or to assimilate what was happening. But I’m pretty sure they felt it, at least, that my father was gone. But other than that, I don’t think they really understood the magnitude of the situation.

**Leonardo:** My oldest brother, he’s…a musician, so I think he buried himself in music. He was never home, either. As to my second brother David, he worked. He buried himself in work as well, and so did my mom. As to my brother Luis, the youngest male, he coped with it by going out with his friends just being a teenager, drinking or smoking… My little sister, she has a lot of anger towards my father. She was shy. She was nervous; she didn’t want to talk to anybody. And she didn’t want to make friends, because she wasn’t outgoing. I used to tell my little sister, “It’s okay, he’s coming back soon.”

**Gabriela:** My way of dealing with it was more…emotional. And her way of dealing with it was more – I guess you could say mental. She was older than me, she’s – I think – four years older than me. She already knew what was happening; she knew what being deported meant.
CHAPTER V

Summary and Discussion

The goal of this retrospective study was to better understand the impact of parental deportation on Latino children and their perspective of its impact on relationships within the family. The purpose was also to explore the Latino immigrants’ perceptions of separation and the preservation of the family unit and relationships. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first study to explore the impact of deportation on the family in the Latino community. Currently there are nearly nine million undocumented Latino immigrants living in the U.S. (Hoefer et al., 2007). They often come to the US in search of better employment, to raise their families, and for long term or permanent residence (Hernandez et al., 2007; Hiott et al., 2006). The findings of this study contribute to current literature by focusing on issues related to immigration, deportation, and the impact of separation on the family dynamics and the relationships among family members.

While the study results were consistent with previous research on separation within the Latino immigrant community, new information also emerged. This chapter begins with a summary of the findings as they relate to previous research. This section also highlights new knowledge gained through this study. Next, the findings are discussed through the lens of attachment theory, which was the guiding framework for this study. After this section, there is a discussion of limitations of the study, followed by implications for marriage and family therapists. Lastly, areas for future research are reviewed.
Discussion of the Findings

In discussing the findings of my study, I will start first by exploring my findings as they relate to current literature. After that, I will present the new findings that emerged from the data. When considering the findings of this study, it is important to remember that five of the participants are first generation U.S.-born citizens and the other five are immigrants themselves. In total, three different Latin American cultures are represented; two participants are of Guatemalan descent, seven are of Mexican descent, and one participant is of El Salvadorian descent. While all the participants have diverse backgrounds each of them was exposed to and impacted by issues related to immigration, deportation, legal status, and ultimately parental separation.

Diverse Stressors among Latinos

Previous research has shown that a range of diverse issues exist within the Latino population. Latino immigrants usually come to the U.S. with a series of stressors that are often times related to their country of origin, their cultural sub-group, and the relationship that their country of origin has with the U.S. (Olmos et al., 1999; Comas-Diaz, 2006; Sue & Sue, 1990; Mitrani et al., 2004). These stressors expose Latino immigrants to additional stressors and difficult situations once here in the U.S. This study revealed complex layers of stressors experienced by the participants that were overlapping and concurrent. The participants experienced stressors at three different levels.

First, participants shared stories of stressful events that they experienced as a result of their parents undocumented status and deportation. Paulina and Karla both shared personal experiences that were triggered by their parent’s deportation. They both spoke about their confusion and loneliness related to the overlapping nature of the stress
that they were experiencing. Paulina was placed in foster care immediately after her mother’s capture and deportation. She went from being in a grocery store with her mother and father to moments later being taken away without knowing or fully understanding what had happened, where her parents had been taken, or if she would see them again. She stayed in foster care for six months. Karla shared the story of officers coming to her house at 4 a.m. and going through each room in the house searching for her mother. She described feeling scared and confused because there was little explanation of what was taking place and even less time to say goodbye. During the interview she stated that she still had not spoken to her mother about what happened on that day. These findings support the previous findings in another study that discussed the increased stressors that Latino immigrants experience through migration (Artico, 2003).

Second, participants disclosed the stressors experienced by their parents. Research has shown that immigrants are at increased risk of being uprooted, separated, and being exposed to oppression (Comas-Díaz, 2001). There are a lot of changes that come with relocating to another country. These stressors many times involve parents trying to manage a new start in a foreign land where set backs are unavoidable (Flores, 1992; Falicov, 1998; Artico, 2003). When dealing with significant stressors, people use different methods of coping, some of which may be self-destructive. This study confirmed these findings. Respondents discussed their parents’ withdrawal and feeling overwhelmed by their experience of deportation. One participant remembered that when her father returned he was “pretty much checked out. He wasn’t in any state of mind to be there for me… he wasn’t stable enough.”
Third, participants discussed how stressors on the family impacted the family dynamics and the roles within the family. Living in a household with mixed-status, where the parents are more likely to be undocumented (Comas-Diaz, 2006) places the family under great stress and risk. The family dynamics often shift as children take on parental roles because of separation or because their parents have limited access to support. Participants shared how their parent’s deportation had an immediate and long-term impact on the family dynamics. Diana, shared how she became the mother figure in the house for her siblings and stated that it “really place a burden” on her and that, “it made [her] grow up fast.” Findings from this study revealed that the range, overlapping nature, and the duration of stressors experienced should be given more attention when taking a closer look at the impact of deportation on immigrant families in the U.S.

**Immigration-Related Separation**

Previous studies have revealed that Latinos predominantly immigrate, legally or illegally, to the U.S. for better employment opportunities, education, and a better quality of life for their families (Vidal de Haymes & Kilty, 2007; Hernandez et al., 2007; Hiott et al., 2006) and that most immigrants come to the U.S. with the intent to stay long-term (Hernandez et al., 2007). Literature on the consequences of immigration-related separation is scarce (Woodward et al., 2000; Mitrani et al., 2004). Suarez-Orozco, Todorova, and Louie (2002) cited negative effects for children separated from parents, including attachment difficulties, depressive responses, and behavioral problems. Participants of this study shared feelings of fear, loneliness, and confusion upon separation from their parents. Felipe shared that initially he felt completely devastated. He found it difficult to cope with the loss of his mother and throughout the interview
repeatedly said, “It was devastating. You just don’t know how to deal with it.” Diana discussed her separation from her mom more as something that has left her less than whole: “It felt like there was a big piece missing from my life. It was like I was missing an arm or a leg or an eye, something you have to use every day.”

Findings also revealed that participants experienced significant emotional distress. Previous research has suggested that parent-child separation that takes place while children are still minors is more strenuous because children view their parents as their sole or primary caregiver. Parent-child separation creates instability within the family environment, which causes acute stress for the children. The severity of the stress often disrupts their sense of security and ability to successfully cope with stressors that are present at each developmental stage (Adam & Chase-Lansdale, 2002). Participants discussed their difficulties to cope and discussed these feelings retrospectively. When asked about how separation affected Leonardo when he was a child, he shared that he felt alone and abandoned and that it was like he was, “completely disconnected and robbed.” Paulina also shared vivid childhood memories of what the separation was like for her and she stated that after the separation from her mom “life changed so much. It wasn’t the same.”

According to this study’s findings, experiences related to parental deportation were also impacted by where the participants stayed when their parent was deported. Current literature discusses the difficult experience of being separated from a parent (Mitrani et al., 2004); however, the participants from this study discussed not only the experience of a parent’s deportation but also the impact of where they lived during this time of separation. When a parent was deported some participants stayed at home with
their other parent, some were sent to live a relative, and one participant shared her experience of being placed in foster care. Living in each of these environments is complex and participants were able to give voice to this experience in a way that current literature has not.

Participants that stayed at home with their other parent while separated from the deported parent stated that although they were impacted by the deportation they felt taken care of because they had their family by their side. Leonardo discussed that his family became noticeably poor after his father was deported but that he felt comforted because he was with his family. He remembered that his mother always provided “a roof over our head[s] and always made sure that we had something to eat, even if it was top ramen. It made a big impact on our lives.”

When it came to staying with family members, participants shared varying experiences. Marcela stated that her aunts or uncles helped out a lot. She added, “So when my dad left and we didn’t have anything to eat they would provide for us. So they made a huge difference.” For Gabriela, staying with relatives was difficult because she “was bounced around from family to family” and “stayed with everybody.” Paulina was placed in foster care and shared that they took her and left her with a woman whose name she did not know but that “they” also “took us to this therapist.” Paulina stayed there for nearly a year and had three to four visits from her father in that time. Not knowing if her mother was alive or if she was going to see her again made her time in foster care particularly challenging. These findings revealed another factor associated with immigration related separation and the complexities that make it unique from other forms of separation.
Cohesiveness and Immigrant Families

Previous studies have identified Latinos and the importance of family in providing emotional and social support (Halgunseth et al., 2006; Harwood et al., 2002; Umana et al., 2004). These studies suggest that family cohesiveness plays a strong role in Latino families. More specifically, Latinos define themselves within the context of a relationship with others, particularly family members, and to a collective. Findings from this study provided partial confirmation on these results. More than half of the participants discussed a close family relationship and bond to their parent before the deportation took place. However, some participants did discuss that they had a distant bond with their parent before deportation.

Several of the participants highlighted the need to keep the family together and to maintain family roles. Diana and Rosalba both discussed the closeness they felt to their family. Diana shared her feelings of “being joined at the hip to her mother” and during the interview joked about the umbilical cord never being cut when she was born. Rosalba, on the other hand, discussed a sense of admiration for her father for making her feel secure because she understood him to be the provider of the family. These findings support the strong cultural roles that fathers are more the providers in the family whereas mothers are the nurturer to the children (Mitrani et al., 2004; Amato & Keith, 1991; Hetherington et al., 1998).

Participants shared that when their parents did not take on these more culturally assumed roles, there was great disappointment on behalf of the participants and/or other family members. Paulina discussed the painful experience of trying to get close to her mother upon reunification while noticing that her mother was distancing herself from
Paulina and her sister. She recalled, “It’s hard when you’re trying to do one thing and your mom is trying to do something else.” Paulina’s mother was unavailable to provide the nurturing closeness that Paulina and her sister desired and this impacted their relationship with her.

Additional results from this study indicated a new finding not present in the literature review. Current literature stresses the importance of family among Latinos. As mentioned above, family cohesiveness is supported by cultural norms and impacts how young Latinos prioritize goals in their lives (i.e., doing what is best for the individual versus what is best for the family). However, findings of this study indicated that while all participants experienced the pressure of maintaining cultural norms within their family, some followed the norms while discussing their need to be less cohesive with family members. This suggests that as immigrant families go through difficult experiences it can become more challenging to maintain cultural family norms and cohesiveness.

Participants gave various examples of choosing what was best for them over what was perceived to be best for the family. Juan shared, for example, that he did not want to be at home: “The family was always there for me, but I’m the type of person that was like, ‘Okay, home reminded me of [the deportation].’ That’s why I never wanted to be home.” As participants acknowledged their decisions to be less cohesive they also discussed the struggle they had about making that decision. Felipe discussed the complexities of feeling needed while wanting his space and shared that his relationship with his mother “wasn’t as close anymore because we weren’t spending as much time together... I wasn’t needy, but she was needy.” He talked about his mother’s desire to be
with him every day after school and the difficult decision to continue to play basketball and be with his girlfriend that prohibited him from spending as much time with his mom and family as he had when he was younger.

**Ambiguous Loss**

Previous studies have examined the impact that ambiguous loss has on family members (Boss, 2003; Boss, 2004). Families try to deal with the challenges of reconciling their loss through validation from their communities and culture. One of the challenging aspects of ambiguous loss is that it freezes the grieving process and impacts cognition which disrupts coping and decision-making (Boss, 1999; 2004). The findings from this research confirm this literature. Participants shared feelings of confusion and difficulty in finding closure during their time of separation from their parent. When discussing how she coped with separation from her father Marcela shared that she knew she had a father but she did not “know if he’s going to come back or not.” She found it difficult to reconcile the fact that her father was physically gone but that he was alive living somewhere else without knowledge of his return. As a result, during the interview she shared that her way of coping was to try concentrate on something else. Rosalba discussed that during her separation from her father she, “never talked to anybody about how to deal with it” she shared that she just watched television and hung out with friends to try to forget what had happened.

Additional literature further discussed the impact that ambiguous loss has on the family (Boss, 2002, 2004, 2006). Families sometimes feel that they are not allowed to process their loss or that their loss is negative or shameful. This can be especially difficult for family members that are going through the experience of ambiguous loss because
each family member suffers in silence. Family members often miss out on opportunities to be comforted by one another during their time of grief and loss, which can lead to feelings of isolation (Boss, 2006). Participants shared feelings of not being allowed to talk about what happened and subsequently experiencing loneliness. When discussing how he coped with his father’s deportation Juan talked about the difficulty of going through such a significant experience while not having the opportunity to process his feelings with his family: “We never talked. We really never talked about him leaving; it affected us a lot.”

Paulina also commented on the complexity of not being able to talk about her father’s deportation. “We were not allowed to [talk about it]. Our dad forbade us from that. We were not allowed to talk about it…whatever happened, happened.” Due to the nature of ambiguous loss, loved ones many times deal with additional issues such as shame or fear. The effort to keep individuals quiet about the experience can be an attempt to protect the family from further shame or other consequences. However, this puts family members at a higher risk of isolation as they try to move through their loss (Boss, 2004, 2006).

Findings from this study revealed that participants were impacted by the ambiguity of their loss. Previous research has indicated that regardless of cultural background all families have to deal with experiences of loss and are left with the task of coping with those relationships and the relationships that are impacted.

**Theoretical Framework**

Bowlby’s attachment theory was used as a theoretical framework for this study. This theory highlighted the complexities of relationships and the stories that emerged in
the data, particularly regarding the role of deportation and separation in shaping relationships in Latino immigrant families. I will discuss the dominant discourses regarding parental deportation which impacted participant’s lives and relationships through attachment theory. I will also discuss how participants have gone through these experiences and how it has impacted their relationships.

**Attachment Theory**

This theory places a high value on relationships and more specifically emphasizes how different interactions and experiences impact meaningful relationships (Bowlby, 1988). Attachment Theory is based on the assumptions that children are greatly influenced by the physical and emotional need for an actual bond with a real attachment figure, not just in infancy but also throughout life (Brandall & Ringel, 2007). Findings indicated that immigrant Latino families are tremendously impacted when parental deportation takes place. Respondents discussed how their relationship was impacted during separation and reunification. They drew a connection between the changes in their attachment bond with their parent and the unexpectedness, uncertainty, and confusion that came with their parents’ deportation. Felipe shared, “I grew up. I wasn’t a child anymore; I didn’t need her as much as I did when I was younger.” The findings from this study suggest that participants felt that the deportation experience impacted their attachment bond with their parent, which made it challenging to just pick up where they left off.

Bowlby (1988) stressed that attachment bonds were fluid and not rigid. He believed that a distant attachment bond could be changed and return back to a strong relational bond. Several respondents shared that they were able to work through the
impact that deportation had on their family and move towards a strong attachment bond once again. Findings indicated that Latino immigrants went through a lot of challenges when a loved one was deported and that many times relationships strengthened and weakened during various parts of the experience. This idea is rooted in the premise of the power of relationships and our human desire to connect and have a meaningful bond with another (Bowlby, 1959).

In their stories, several respondents referenced the reaction to a parent’s deportation in connection with the developmental stage of the participant and sibling. Specifically, they expressed their difficulty to cope with the separation from their parent and described their separation as a loss that was more than the loss of a parent. Diana shared, “It was hard not having her with me… it was like I was missing an arm or a leg or an eye, something you have to use every day.” According to attachment theory, parental separation during the early childhood might be most detrimental because of the strong bond and dependence established during this time in the parent-child relationship (Adam & Chase-Lansdale, 2002).

Respondents discussed the challenges of going through this loss during such a critical stage for the parent-child bond. Some shared vivid memories of the deportation and talked about difficulties coping with the range of emotions experienced during separation and reunification. Attachment theory is also based on the assumption that parent-child separation creates instability within the family environment, which causes acute stress for the children (Adam & Chase-Lansdale, 2002; Bowlby, 1969). Some participants reported becoming avoidant towards their parents or family members:
specifically, Juan shared how he always buried himself “in books or after school activities” so that he did not have to come home until it was late.

The concept of attachment styles as discussed by Bowlby (1969) was also reflected in the findings. The findings suggest that during the experience of parental deportation attachment bonds change in the parent-child relationship and with other family members. Parents may withdraw upon reunification, children may feel ambivalent about their parent’s return, or bonds might become stronger upon reunification. Many participants felt unable to talk about their feelings and subsequently withdrew and became anxious and saddened by their parent’s absence.

The changes in attachment styles may be temporary or long-term. This was explored when some respondents shared that they were able restore their “closer bond” with their deported parent while others felt their parent-child relationship suffered well into adulthood. Participants spoke about changes in their parent-child and family relationships during their parent’s deportation. Because experiences and relationships impact one another, it is important to recognize when certain experiences elicit behaviors or emotions (e.g., sadness, fear, hopelessness, and anxiety) that stress the individual and his/her relationships.

Bowlby’s attachment theory helped highlight the various emotions that participants discussed during their parents’ deportations. According to Robertson and Bowlby (1952), separation anxiety is a natural response to a current threat or some other risk of loss. Once a loss has been experienced children typically go through a three-phase response to the separation: protest, despair, and denial or detachment. In some cases, an additional emotion such as anger can develop when there are threats of abandonment,
specifically in older children and adolescents (Bowlby, 1988). This study revealed a number of incidents in which parental separation created secure, anxious, or distressing experiences and interactions.

Participants shared many stories that supported the three-phase separation response theory. Several described feelings of separation anxiety and had a response of protest to the loss. Rosalba shared that she was not ready to discuss or accept her parent’s deportation; she “never talked to anybody about how to deal with it” but just “watched TV or went over to a friend’s [house] … to forget that it happened.” Others revealed a response of despair during their time of grief and mourning. Felipe discussed the painful experience of his mother’s deportation and shared that he “would get sad and start to cry and get real upset” because he thought, “What’s going to happen if she doesn’t come back?” Stories also highlighted detachment as participants tried to cope with their loss through repression. Rosalba, for example, shared that during the deportation she “tried to forget about what happened.” These stories elicited strong emotions during the interviews as respondents described how they coped with the loss of their parent.

**Limitations**

This study has several limitations. This study has a small sample size. In an exploratory phenomenological study, a sample size of ten participants is appropriate (van Manen, 1999); however, it is not appropriate for making generalizations. More research in the field is needed before the findings can be generalized.

The sampling procedure for this study poses some limitations. In recruiting the participants, I connected with individuals that were already involved in community programs established to improve the quality of life for Latino immigrant families.
Community leaders such as church members, social workers, mariachi singers, and Spanish-speaking teachers referred several participants to me. While this limitation might bias the findings, the participants felt comfortable taking part in this study primarily because of the trust they have in their community leaders. The community leaders serve a vital role in their communities and are gatekeepers for immigrant families. In the Latino community disclosing details of a deportation experience is taboo. Some of the individuals that agreed to participate in this study shared that they had not even shared their stories with the person that referred them.

It is possible that some fear may have impacted the accuracy of participants’ representation in this study. Several participants who expressed an interest in the study initially declined to participate in the end. Some made reference to la migra (the border patrol) or expressed concern with talking about something that was illegal. Although some of these comments seemed to be made in jest, it is important to note that they may nonetheless indicate a level of fear associated with potentially disclosing illegal activity. Participants described varying different levels of concern about sharing their stories. Although all information was kept confidential and pseudonyms were assigned to the respondents, it must be respected that some participants might have been a little more conservative in retelling their stories for fear of putting their families at risk or having their stories recognized by others, which might bring them shame for exposing their feelings and family secrets.

Some participants felt it was inappropriate or impermissible to talk about childhood memories of their parents being deported. A few of the participants discussed the difficult process of trying to repair the familial bond with their deported parent. This
complex process could have led participants to give responses that were more socially desirable. Participants may have over-reported the positive, (e.g., reporting that things were “great” when the deported parent returned) or underrated the negative (e.g., reporting things were “not that bad” when deported parent was absent). Children of undocumented parents are multicultural and many are aware of the subtle or overt negative perception that certain groups have of Latino families living in the U.S. Due to the intimate and detailed nature of the interview process, it is possible that participants exercised a level of caution that prevented them from sharing certain details that might indicate negative views about Latino immigrant families.

A factor that acted both as a limitation and strength was connected to my cultural identity. I am not Mexican or South American, but Black Central American with strong connections to the North American culture. Physically, I am different in that I do not appear to have any heritage from Spain. It is possible that some participants from countries geographically closer to the U.S. did not feel this issue of undocumented citizens and immigration was something that I could fully relate to or understand. Although my country of origin and African roots may have been a limitation for some participants, they may also have put other participants at ease.

Another critical limitation is the influence of potential biases brought on by my personal life experiences on this study. Throughout the research process I bracketed my biases, thoughts, and feelings. I used peer debriefing and an internal auditor to strengthen the integrity of the study. While conducting this study I struggled with issues related to breaking the law and the question of whether the cause for doing so justified the means. I dealt with some of these issues by having regular conversations with peers about the
topic, which helped me to connect with my participants. In remaining transparent, my life experiences could not be completely separated; however, I believe my bicultural heritage was an asset as participants with different cultural identities were able to connect with me and find some level of trust during the interviews.

**Implications**

Conducting this research has enriched my therapeutic abilities and sparked a deeper compassion in me for the complex life experiences of others. In light of the study findings, there are several implications for practitioners that work with the Latino immigrant community. It is my hope that this discussion will inspire clinicians to think critically about their role in the therapeutic process and to challenge themselves to engage in the life experiences that clients entrust to them. The following section addresses recommendations for future practice on issues affecting this population.

**Self of the Therapist**

I began this study because I was excited about the topic and was aware that it had not previously been well researched. I felt that such a study would contribute significantly to understanding of the larger experience of deportation. Although I felt I was sharing the story of a group of people that I identify with culturally, I also knew there were significant differences between us. Some participants’ experiences were vastly different from mine; they told stories of significant loss, economic disadvantage, and growing up with their parent’s absence or with parents who were not legally permitted into the country.

While working with this population it became very apparent that I needed to re-evaluate my ideas of how our lives are shaped by race, class, gender, religion, and
language. By acknowledging that these social categories exist at all times and impact the way that we relate to the world, we are able to make contact with the deeper interconnectedness that they play in our lives and relationships. Understanding the multiple influencing factors around me better involves living with an awareness of self, other, and context (Satir, 1976). As I went through each interview I continued to develop my thoughts about my role as a therapist. I have come to a deeper understanding that as therapists, we must connect with the multiple dimensions of ourselves and those around us because we all have something of unique value. By exploring our multiple dimensions we are able to acknowledge that each of us makes a difference and that each of us is needed.

Therapists often work with individuals and families that connect back to them in some shape or form, whether through race, class, gender, sexual orientation, language, citizenship status, or country of origin. Therapists must work on these various dimensions of themselves in order to be more present in the room. Therapists typically achieve a heightened self-awareness by consciously dealing with old wounds (trauma) and accepting that life experiences impact the way they experience the world and others. When therapists engage in their own journeys to heal and resolve past issues, they can act as guides and models of personal and relational growth and healing for others.

My work on this research study has allowed me to explore and share untold stories but more personally it has helped me reflect on some of my own challenges, difficulties, and victories of growing up in the U.S. with an immigrant family. I have become more comfortable with who I am and now have a better understanding of why I
experience the world the way I do. In my ability to better understand myself I have been able to better develop my compassion for others.

Through the development of this research study I have been able to tap into a deeper journey of self. At different points I have had to deal with my own feelings both personally and professionally, about immigration and individuals entering the country illegally. Imaginably, this has been a complex and many times difficult topic for me to articulate my position on; and even so with the completion of this study there are still areas within this debate that I do not have a clear position on. Throughout this process, I thought about African slaves sending their children with someone they hardly knew through the Underground Railroad with a vague plan of escaping and reuniting with their children in one of the free northern states. I thought about my parents putting their dreams aside and working long hours just to give their children the access to education, technology, and a childhood they never had. I also thought about the woman that put my adoptive sister up for adoption. She has shared that she was living a lifestyle in which she knew she would not be able to care for a baby. She wanted my sister to have an opportunity to be raised with unconditional love and family support.

I look at all these examples and undocumented parents in the U.S. as personal choices that all have something in common. In each of these examples, individuals have to make difficult choices that can be viewed by society as illegal or just simply provocative. But an argument can be made that people made these choices with the hope of giving their family, children, and/or loved ones an opportunity for something better. This may be where my position on the topic stands. We are all humans, and it is simply human nature to strive for something better for those that mean the most to us. That
internal desire to give your offspring a better life cannot be shut down by politics or policies of the time. For me, immigration is a human issue that affects everyone. So the answer comes with understanding that undocumented individuals living in the U.S. is not an “us against them” debate but a dialogue about the large discrepancy of adequate resources in various regions around the globe.

Issues related to immigration and deportation are simultaneously international and national. I have come to the conclusion during my research study that immigrants (documented or undocumented) are individuals that are a part of every community. They are a very diverse group that cannot be characterized by any one description. So in my work of self of the therapist, I believe that regardless of the current politicized position on the issue of immigration, they too deserve the right to therapeutic services if they so desire.

**Recommendations for Clinical Practice**

**Bear Witness**

Undocumented immigrants that have gone through deportation typically do not feel safe enough to share their stories. Whether the event occurred one week or one decade in the past, the details of how and why a parent or loved one was deported are seldom retold. In many cases, immigrants might not feel comfortable talking about what they lived through with someone that has not experienced similar things. When therapists are working with families that have experienced deportation, it is critical to pay attention to the storytelling process. Outsiders must bear witness to truly create a space for healing and human connectedness throughout the therapeutic visits. Witnessing sends messages that the clients’ pain is real, that their stories are important, and that their lives make a
difference. Witnessing is a gift to the healing process and is a model of congruent and healthy communication. A witnessing therapist is grounded, centered, and only concerned with remaining present and available to the client.

**Understand the Impact of Deportation on the Immigrant Family**

Deportation separates the family and it is typically involuntary. Therapists working with a family that has experienced deportation must understand that there are residual effects that continue to impact the family. In this study, participants discussed that their experience of deportation of a loved one often included other multifaceted experiences such as witnessing their parents arrest or a home invasion. These experiences add to the intense impact that deportation has on the family. Future studies that examine the details of being arrested and how undocumented individuals reenter the country illegally can add to the complex experience of deportation and the challenges of reuniting with the family remaining in the U.S. Therapists must be mindful that the deportation of a loved one, specifically a parental figure, can be a severely traumatizing experience. By having this understanding, therapists can play a supportive role and provide the space clients need to slowly make meaning of their lives, relationships, and all the intense feelings involved in the experience.

Each member of a family plays an important role in the family dynamic. It is critical for therapists to understand the challenge that many Latino immigrant families face when trying to make ends meet without the presence of a parental figure. Respondents shared that life with a deported parent many times consisted of relocating to and living with extended family or extended family moving in to help support the family. The family may present as off-balance or even in a state of complete disorder. Therapists
might find it helpful to have these clients acknowledge how a parent’s absence has impacted the family system and facilitate conversations about how the family roles might require adjustment and how those changes might impact family members and their expectations of one another.

**The Experience of Parental Deportation Is Not the Same for Everyone**

When a parent is deported and separated from their children as described in this study it is plausible to assess that deportation is a significant life event. However, it is critical to remain curious about and respectful of the unique experiences that clients reveal. In this research participants shared diverse responses throughout the experience of their time of separation and reunification from their deported parent. It is natural and important to acknowledge the obvious loss during the time of separation from their parent and discuss how this loss impacted their family and relationship. However, as described by participants in this research study, separation through parental deportation was not the same for everyone. Relationships are complex and several participants shared feelings of relief, abandonment, increased independence, and opportunities to connect with their other parent throughout various phases of separation and reunification from the deported parent.

It is crucial that therapists try to remain sensitive, non-judgmental, and curious regarding immigration- and deportation-related issues and give clients permission to speak their truth. There are so many factors that play a role into how a person may experience such a significant event; however, it is the combination of those factors that makes parental deportation a personal experience and not just a statistical event. Giving clients permission to share and explore their own experiences and understand how
relationships impact their reality can help clients during their journey of acceptance, intrapersonal and interpersonal healing.

**Families that have had a parent deported experience illegitimate loss**

Our society disseminates conflicting messages about immigrant families, specifically in connection with deportation, and these messages may come from a macro level (i.e., news, policies, or federal/state law) or a micro level (i.e., a neighbor, friend, church member, or co-worker). Through these messages people are told nearly every day that their grief and loss are illegitimate. Therapists would benefit by examining their perceptions about the immigrant community because these types of messages occur concurrently and at different degrees. It is imperative that therapists consciously deconstruct these convoluted messages and seek a greater understanding of the complexity of the immigrant community. Stepping away from a place of judgment and persecution can help therapists listen more, remain open and curious, and offer compassion.

Therapists must challenge themselves and regularly deconstruct these convoluted messages about immigrant communities to remain present when working with clients. When working with families that have experienced an illegitimate loss (e.g., parental deportation) one of the more helping things a therapist can do is to give families the permission to feel, express and give a voice to their loss. Giving clients permission to peel back each layer of their feelings allows them to focus more on their loss and grief and less on trying to defend or justify their feelings and their loss. When working with clients that have experienced an illegitimate loss, therapists must give confirmation that their loss is valid and no less than any other loss. Empowering clients around the
existence of their loss allows them to wholeheartedly acknowledge, deal with, and heal from their loss. Therapists should provide clients with a safe space to grieve and should encourage and help clients identify individuals and systems that can support, validate, mourn and heal with them during their loss.

**Permit Multiple Roles**

In this research participants shared that there were moments where they had to deal with multiple roles as a result of their parent’s deportation. Several participants spoke of feeling devastated during the separation and having to take on an adult role. Other participants commented on their parent’s return and the difficulty of trying to maintain their independence while trying to reconnect with their deported parent. Many times these multiple roles left respondents feeling overwhelmed and conflicted.

Therapists must understand that personal identity is continuously evolving and this process entails different feelings (e.g., shame, confusion, strength, and acceptance). Therapists need to validate the process that clients go through.

While a larger understanding of the cultural similarities that exist within the community can be beneficial in having a better understanding of clients’ cultures, it is also important to pay close attention to their unique experiences. This permits the therapist to recognize the cultural pieces while not solely relying on what may or may not be culturally acceptable. Latino immigrants come from a more collectivistic society and regularly deal with the struggles of negotiating collectivism and individualism while living in the U.S. At times, clients make life decisions that might cause them great shame within their culture and it is critical that therapists are sensitive to these types of decisions that conflict with another part of clients’ identities.
Understand the Legal and Social Impacts of Being Undocumented in the U.S.

Currently, undocumented immigrants entering the U.S. are considered illegal under state and federal law. Although individual state policies regarding undocumented residence may vary, it is still considered a punishable crime. Detained illegal immigrants can face deportation or stand trial for the offense; if found guilty, they may serve time in a federal or state correctional facility and then be deported back to their countries of origin. Undocumented individuals and families living in the U.S. are given a limited amount of legal protection, and it is critical that therapists understand the probability that clients’ legal statuses will impact the way they live their lives and much of that will spill into the therapeutic process. Being an undocumented citizen is an identity that our illegal clients wear in every setting, even in the therapy room.

There are many complexities in the identity of an undocumented citizen living in the U.S., and therapists must make a conscious effort to be compassionate, mindful, and non-judgmental. Challenging preconceived notions about legal and illegal immigrants (e.g., “Immigrants don’t want to learn English!” or “Immigrants don’t want to learn about the American system!”) is particularly important and is the first step to working with this population. Remaining open and curious can help therapists understand that undocumented immigrants are often victims of crimes in the U.S. because of their status and they typically have no access to community services or the local law enforcement.

Recognize That the Paranoia and Skepticism Are Not about You

In this study a couple of participants discussed their deported parents’ behavior upon reunification. One participant in particular spoke about his mother’s reluctance to talk about her deportation experience and her hyper vigilance about keeping her children
by her side for fear that she would get deported again. In the mental health field there are times when a client is labeled non-compliant or resistant. This is a typical assumption when the client does not take the recommendations of the therapist and may involve medication management, attending additional sessions, bringing another family member to therapy, or following through on additional services. It is important for therapists working with undocumented immigrants to know that these clients might see things regarding their treatment differently than their therapists. Therapists must demonstrate patience and develop treatment plans that include the clients’ thoughts. What may seem to be paranoia may actually be valid fear due to other risk factors that therapists are unaware of. Studies on family secrets and the role that they play in undocumented Latino families living in the U.S. can also help reveal barriers in the therapist-client relationship. It is critical that therapists avoid pathologizing behaviors or thought processes that might not be fully understood.

**Deal Effectively With Families That Relocate Frequently**

There are many Latino immigrant families living in the U.S. that engage in some level of relocation. Typical reasons for relocation include employment or evasion of deportation raids. Therapists must understand that relocation is a factor that shapes these families, their understanding of the world around them, and the resources that they have access to. As discussed in this study, relocation is an issue that instantaneously impacts all family members. There are often losses associated with relocation that exacerbate the stress already placed on the family, including loss of employment, sense of security, community, and loss of family and community support.
There are some conscious efforts therapists can make to better understand issues related to relocation and the barriers or benefits these may create for the family. A family that has recently relocated to the U.S. or a new community may not have the resources to attend therapy sessions twice a week. Likewise, some of the post-session processing a therapist might ask a family to complete might go undone due to other priorities, such as seeking employment. Remaining curious and creating space for open dialogue about the barriers and strengths that these families have can prove very helpful. Due to the collectivistic cultural experience, undocumented families living in the U.S. may be unable to or not be used to processing, brainstorming, or problem-solving issues with a non-family member who may also have additional knowledge about resources and the community. This is where therapists need to not only remain curious about the family but also try to have conversations about the potential pain, hardship, or just the difficult decisions made in relation to the deportation and how these have impacted the family. It would also be helpful to look for any generational patterns in family relocation when analyzing the multicultural genogram.

**Highlight Community Strength and Vulnerability**

Many Latino immigrants living in the U.S. are marginalized by the community at large. They often rely on their families to help them navigate challenges, but these families feel powerless and typically maintain a collectivistic perspective while living in an individualistic society. Participants in this study discussed feelings of isolation during parental separation and also shared experiences of family support during the experience of parental deportation. This conflict in cultural values and norms reveals both strengths and vulnerabilities within the community. Recognizing the constant negotiations that
undocumented immigrants make on a daily basis can help the therapist better understand these strengths and vulnerabilities.

Facilitating conversations about the impact of deportation on clients’ lives and relationships can help identify strength that was pulled from a vulnerable situation. Undocumented immigrants’ life experiences can be complicated and full of intense feelings. Specifically, therapists working with school-aged children should be sensitive to these issues and invite children to share their stories of how deportation has impacted their lives. This is a delicate process that can give children of deported parents a starting point to create movement in heavy, paralyzing feelings such as shame, guilt, resentment, and hopelessness. This process can help clients create new stories that include their strengths. Therapists can engage clients in conversations that explore their strengths on multiple levels, helping clients connect or reconnect with supportive community members while decreasing their vulnerability to risk.

**Deal with the Process with a Multicultural Lens**

In an effort to better understand clients, therapists must remain curious about and welcoming of other ways of knowing. In this study participants discussed the secrecy, shame, and confusion related the experience of the deportation of a loved one. Exploration of a family’s explanation for what took place in association to the unexpected and disruptive nature of deportation can help family members with coping with their loss. Focusing less on the rationality of client interpretations and more on how it frames clients’ understanding of their lives can prove more beneficial to their process. In this research one respondent shared that she was angry with her father for being deported but mainly because his inability to return promptly to the U.S. meant that he did
not love her enough. Therapists can help by questioning clients’ understanding of the meaning they are making and exploring what clients might have to do to change the circumstances. By doing so, the clients are much more likely to feel validated and free to share more about their lives and perspectives. Latino immigrants living in the U.S. are a subjugated group. Therapists should provide a safe environment where clients can express their cultural views or practices without criticism or insult in order to facilitate healing. This gives Latino immigrants the opportunity to have a voice and to speak through their cultural identity.

Again, it is important to recognize that although there are similarities within the Latino immigrant culture, there are also differences that should be considered. The use of a cultural family genogram early in the therapeutic process can help a therapist gain more information about an immigrants family’s cultural history and can lead to conversations about family history in regards to race, class, gender, language, citizenship, sexual orientation, and other factors that have helped shape clients’ cultural views of the world. This information can also help reveal the level of support and participation that clients share with their families and in their communities.

Latino immigrants living in the U.S. can be resourceful and typically get information about things in the community through word of mouth. Many immigrants often play important roles within their neighborhoods, including bilingual translator of important documents, spiritual leader, local information source, or caretaker for children while neighborhood parents are at work. All of these roles are important to the functionality of the neighborhood. It is important for therapists to gain an individual
understanding of a client’s roles and explore the multiple cultures that may exist in the client’s life.

When working with Latino immigrants it is important to gain a better understanding of their identities and family legacies through a multicultural lens. These questions can help guide therapists through the therapeutic process:

1. What are your family’s experience and thoughts about separation?
2. What are the right and wrong ways to communicate with your family?
3. What language(s) do people in your family speak and how does language impact the relationships?
4. How does citizenship status impact the family?
5. How does your family deal with difficulties/challenges?
6. How are the roles for men and women in your family?
7. How does your family resolve difficult situations?
8. How do you and your family cope with your pain?
9. How does your family show support for one another?

**Future Research**

This study revealed that deportation is a complex and surreal experience that impacts undocumented Latino families living in the U.S. This study was conducted because of the relative paucity of research examining the relational impact of deportation on undocumented Latino families living in the U.S. This study specifically explored the impact of the deportation experience on Latino immigrants by gaining insight from adult participants that revealed their childhood experience of their parent’s deportation. It would be helpful to replicate this study with larger number of participants in other
geographical locations. This area of work will significantly enrich the current literature by providing a more thorough understanding of how Latino immigrants have been impacted by deportation.

Each participant told a detailed story about a parent’s deportation and how it impacted his or her relationship with that parent. However, during the interview I asked additional questions about their personal opinions of deportation in general: 1) What advice would you give families that have just had a deported parent immigrate back into the U.S to reunite with their family? 2) What was particularly helpful or detrimental to your development during the separation and reunification? and 3) What would you like the public to know about deportation and what it is like to have a parent deported? Participants gave very detailed answers but after taking a closer look at what this study was focusing on, which was the accounts of the experience of parental deportation these responses were not added into the study. However, because of the rich responses from these three questions it is expected that these responses be used for in the development of a later study.

Stories shared during the interviews revealed additional underlying stories that were identified in this study but not thoroughly explored. Many participants related that after the deportation their deported parent underwent a significant amount of trauma because of the experience of deportation. Some participants talked about their deported parent being different upon return – withdrawn, depressed, physically abusive, or turned to substance abuse – as a result of the trauma surrounding the separation from their family. These issues were mentioned and even identified in the analysis; however, it is my recommendation that future research be conducted to explore the type of trauma that
is experienced when an undocumented individual is deported back to his or her country of origin.

Because of its exploratory nature, there was a wide range of inquiry in this study. Several of its emerging themes may well be studied independently, such as preexisting risk factors that impact family dynamics when dealing with deportation, reunification and the family’s ability to heal after separation, and the ways silence and secrecy impacts a child’s ability cope with loss. The literature on couple relationships in these families is small. Examining the effects of separation through deportation on the marital relationship would be an exciting contribution. Studies conducted in these areas will enrich our understanding of how the current federal laws on immigration impact different sub-systems in families and families as a whole and how therapists can treat these families within limited parameters.

**Conclusion**

This study investigated issues associated with Latino immigrant deportation, an increasingly controversial topic in the last ten years. This study uncovered a gap in the literature on marriage and family therapy and my hope is that through it, Latino immigrants will begin to receive more representation in our field. It is important to note that although the experience of deportation is a socially relevant and significant reality for the Latino immigrant community, there are other aspects of Latino families that are also worth investigating.

Interviewing participants was an emotionally intensive and humbling process. In the interviews participants shared not just their stories but also a part of their lives that many had never shared with someone outside of the family. They opened up because they
wanted their experiences with deportation and its impact on their families to be known and accurately represented. Many shared that some interview questions provoked a level of deeper reflection during and even several days after the interview. Some contacted me after the initial interview just to let me know that the interview had motivated them to process with the parent that had been deported and to reflect on what that experience had been like for the parent and the parent-child relationship. This feedback was exciting because a major component of the study was about understanding the impact of deportation on relationships.

This study has revealed that deportation is more than an isolated event. It is a multifaceted experience with residual factors that impact the person who was deported and their family. Undocumented individuals remain cautious when talking about issues related to deportation and immigration. This study gave suggestions on how marriage and family therapists can help Latino immigrant families deal with deportation. Further research is required to better understand the lives, values, and experiences of Latino immigrant families.
APPENDIX A

Glossary of Terms

American(s) - American(s)
Ataques de nervios- Attack of the nerves
Boricuas- Another term for Puerto Rican
Brujeria- Witchcraft
Con el culo entre dos sillas- with my ass in between 2 chairs
Compadres- Godfather
Commodre- Godmother
Curanderismo- Is a form of folk healing that includes various techniques such as prayer, herbal medicine, healing rituals, spiritualism, massage and psychic healing.
Distrito Federal de la ciudad de Mexico- Federal Districo of Mexico City
Espirítismo- Spiritism; this is a Latin American and Caribbean belief that good and evil spirits can affect health, luck and other elements of human life.
El gua gua- The bus (Puerto Rican Spanish)
Familismo- Familism; this is a Latin American and Caribbean belief that the family should be placed ahead of individual interests and development. It includes a lot of responsibilities and obligations to immediate family members and other kin.
Hispano(s)- Hispanic(s)
Ife- In traditional Yoruba culture, Ifa refers to a system of divination and the verses of the literary corpus known as the Odu Ifa presented in the courses of divination
Latino(s)- Latin(s)
Mal de ojo- Evil eye; is a belief among various cultures that people will suffer from illness from the look of a stare or a hex.
Novela(s)- Soap Opera(s)
Promesas- Promises
Respeto- Respect
Republica de Panama- Republic of Panama
Quichean-Mamean- One of the classified languages spoken on the language family tree from Guatemala
Quiencera(s)- Fifteenth birthday
Santeria- A syncretic religion of West Africa and Caribbean origin
Virgen de Guadalupe- Virgin of Guadalupe
Xicanos- Chicano
APPENDIX B
Consent Form

Deportation and the Family
Hello, my name is Erika C. Flores and I am a doctoral student in the department of Marriage and Family Therapy at Syracuse University. I am inviting you to participate in a research study. I want to thank you again for your interest and would like to ask additional questions.

As a Latina family therapist, I am interested in learning more about individuals that have had an undocumented parent deported in order to gain a better understanding of how it impacts the parent-child relationship. I am curious about how you managed the challenges you may have faced. My hope is that your thoughts, feelings, and experiences will help other family therapists better understand Latino families living in America and some of the unique issues that impact them. I hope that by sharing your stories and information people will be more aware and sensitive to these experiences. In order to do this the information you share will be used in my dissertation and perhaps in publications and/or presentations in the field of Marriage and Family Therapy.

If you choose to take part in this research, you will meet with me for an individual interview. The interview will last 60-90 minutes. Each interview will be audio-taped so that I can capture your stories the best way possible. The tapes will be locked away in a fireproof safe that will be kept inside of a double locked office until the study is finished.

A study ID number will be assigned to participants. This number will be assigned to keep participants’ information anonymous. A hard copy notebook will contain the name/contact information of each participant. The notebook and all the audio tapes will also be kept in a safe and double locked office during the study and afterwards they will be destroyed.

Your name and all information that could identify you will be kept confidential. When I analyze the tape, I will use the assigned study ID number to track your responses so your name is never together with your information. A transcriptionist will transcribe your tape and will also be ethically responsible for maintaining your confidentiality. When the interview is transcribed, I will be happy to give you the chance to read it and make comments.

The benefit of this research is that you will be helping me understand how immigration and deportation impacts the parent-child relationship and the ways that you have successfully coped with this experience. This information may help other therapists
become more sensitive to the issues of deportation and immigration and how they impact Latino families. The risk of participating in therapy is that you may choose to discuss difficult experiences that you had and you could feel frustrated, angry, or disappointed, for example. This risk can be minimized by my asking very open questions so that you can decide how much you want to share with me. If you are interested in seeing a counselor, I can provide you with contact information.

Even if you decide to participate in the study, you can stop and change your mind at any time. Participating in the study is voluntary. Should you choose to withdraw from the study after participating in the interview there will be no consequences.

If you would like to contact me with questions or concerns I can be reached at (315) 443-3023, or by email at ecbeckle@syr.edu.

You can also contact my faculty research advisor, Mona Mittal at (315) 443-3023 or the Institutional Review Board at Syracuse University at (315) 443-3013 if you have any concerns.
Informed Consent Form
Deportation and the Family

All of my questions have been answered, and I volunteer to participate in this research study. I understand that I will be audiotaped during the interview. I understand that the tapes will be destroyed as soon as the project has ended. I also give permission for the tapes to be transcribed by a transcriptionist who is bound by the same rules of confidentiality as the researcher.

☐ I agree to be audiotaped ☐ I do not agree to be audiotaped

I understand that I will be provided with a copy of this signed consent form. I understand that the researcher is not protected from legal subpoena related to illegal activities. I understand that this means that I should not disclose information related to illegal activity (e.g. documentation status). I am aware that participation is voluntary and I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

You can also contact my faculty research advisor, Mona Mittal at (315) 443-3023 if you have any questions concerns or complaints about the research. The Institutional Review Board at Syracuse University can be reached at (315) 443-3013 should there be any questions, concerns or complaints that you would like to discuss with someone other than the investigators or if you cannot reach the investigators.

☐ Yes ☐ No

I am above 18 years of age:

Participant Signature: ____________________________ Date: ________________

Printed Name: _________________________________ Date: ________________

Signature of Researcher: _________________________ Date: ________________
APPENDIX C

Interview Questions

1. What was it like growing up in your family?
2. How would you describe your relationship with your parents?
3. How did you find out about your parent’s deportation?
4. How did you deal with the deportation?
   What did you find helpful/ not helpful?
5. How did you and your family deal with the deportation?
   What were some of the feelings that you had?
   Where you able to talk about the feelings that you had?
   If so, with whom? Your Parent(s)?
   What was the experience of your siblings?
6. Tell me the story of when your parent returned to the United States.
   How did you respond upon their return?
   How would you describe your relationship with your parent before and after the deportation?
   If you could change something about this whole process what would it be? Why would you want to change it?
7. How do you think the deportation impacted you and your relationship with your Deported parent?
   How do you believe the gender of the parent being deported would have impacted your experience?
8. Did you talk to your deported parent about the deportation (during separation and reunification)?
   If so, what was the conversation like?
   If not, why and was there anyone else that you were able to talk to?
9. What advice would you give families that have just had a deported parent immigrates back to into the U.S. to reunite with their family?
   What was particularly helpful or detrimental to your development?
10. What would you like the public to know about deportation and what it is like to have a parent deported?
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VITA

NAME OF AUTHOR: Erika Carmen Beckles Flores
PLACE OF BIRTH: San Diego, California, United States
DATE OF BIRTH: March, 6th, 1981

GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOLS ATTENDED:
- Syracuse University
- Alliant International University
- California State University San Marcos
- Mira Costa College

DEGREES AWARDED
- Doctor of Philosophy in Marriage and Family Therapy, 2010, Syracuse University
- Masters of Arts in Marriage and Family Therapy, 2006, Alliant International University
- Bachelor of Arts in Psychology
- Associates Degree in Arts

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCES
- Family Therapist, Palomar Family Counseling Service Inc, 2009-2011
- Family Therapist, Mental Health Systems Inc, 2008-2009
- University Fellow, Syracuse University, 2008-2009
- Graduate Assistant, Syracuse University, 2007-2008
- University Fellow, Syracuse University, 2006-2007