“Our Differences Don’t Separate Us”: Immigrant Families Navigate Intrafamilial Acculturation Gaps Through Diverse Resilience Processes

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In light of mixed findings regarding the valence of outcomes associated with acculturation gaps in mixed-generation immigrant families, this research adopted a qualitative methodology to explore the rich complexity of acculturation gaps and their navigation. Through multiple individual, dyadic, and family semistructured interviews with 2 mixed-generation Salvadoran immigrant families living in the United States, this study explored the ways in which families (a) described and understood their acculturation gaps, (b) determined whether gaps were benign, potentially problematic, or useful for the family, and (c) navigated gaps depending on their determined valence. The individual and family narratives were analyzed through constructivist grounded theory, guided by the theories of acculturation gap-distress (Lau et al., 2005; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996) and family resilience (Walsh, 2003). This research revealed that acculturation gaps can exist among all family members and that although families described gaps in terms of differences in overt behavioral practices, only those discrepant practices that were related to underlying value or identification differences were considered potentially problematic. The families were seen to use their belief systems, organizational patterns, communication and problem-solving strategies, and methods of escape to effectively navigate these gaps in 18 diverse ways depending upon the gaps’ valences. This study suggests that (a) a family resilience model can be applied to the study of acculturation gaps, (b) expansion of such model as applied to acculturation gaps may be indicated, and (c) such model may provide insight into why some families with acculturation gaps experience negative outcomes whereas others flourish.

Keywords: acculturation gaps, family resilience, qualitative research, Salvadoran immigrant families

Throughout the world today migration is a hot topic. One of every five people in the U.S. is a first- or second-generation immigrant. Immigrants leave their countries for copious motives (e.g., economic, social) and enter new countries with the hope of improving life. While working to make hopes reality, they often encounter stressors and barriers, such as lack of health care and education, financial insecurity, unemployment, language barriers, unsafe neighborhoods, social network loss, status/role change, interpersonal conflict, discrimination, and legal issues (Caplan, 2007). Not surprisingly, these challenges are linked to adverse outcomes, such as higher separation, depression, and substance abuse rates, and other negative socioeconomic and physical/mental health outcomes (APA Presidential Task Force on Immigration, 2012). These outcomes impact receiving communities, often cited as reasons why citizens and legislators oppose immigration (Wilkes & Corrigan-Brown, 2011).

Although some immigrants experience poor outcomes, which touch their communities, outcomes vary widely. For example, of the immigrants counted in the 2010 U.S. Census, 39.2% did not have a diploma whereas 23.5% had at
least a bachelor’s degree (United States Census Bureau, 2010). More than 1/4 of immigrant families fall below the poverty line, but 11.7% earn more than $75,000 annually. U.S. immigrants have lower obesity, mortality, and morbidity rates than their U.S.-born counterparts, yet more often perceive themselves in poor health; there is also a high prevalence of mental illness and suicidal ideation among them (e.g., Duldulao et al., 2009; Hovey & King, 1996; Lum & Vanderaa, 2010; Perreira & Ornelas, 2011). Although these data represent a heterogeneous population influenced by many factors, the APA Presidential Task Force on Immigration (2012) described immigrants overall as remarkably resilient, noting they do better on many outcomes compared with those remaining in their countries of origin, as well as with second-, third-, and fourth-generation immigrants. Studying resilience is important to understanding immigrants’ lives and experiences.

The field of psychology has endeavored to explain immigrants’ varying degrees of well-being by examining acculturation, a process that occurs when groups come into contact and possibly change their practices (e.g., language, media, traditions), values (e.g., interdependence, autonomy), and identifications (e.g., Salvadoran, American, Latina/o; Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010). The most widely accepted model of acculturation is Berry’s (1980) bidimensional model, which views acquisition of the new culture and retention of the original culture as two dimensions that can work in tandem (Schwartz et al., 2010). The model accordingly defines four acculturation outcomes: assimilation (high acquisition, low retention), separation (low acquisition, high retention), marginalization (low acquisition, low retention), and biculturalism (high acquisition, high retention). Acculturation is conceptualized as an individual process, so a family can consist of members who hold varying acculturative statuses. For example, children may adapt to the country of residence more quickly than parents, leading to an ‘assimilated’ child and a ‘separated’ parent. These differences have been proposed, and partially empirically supported, to relate to conflict, distress, maladjustment, and behavioral problems (i.e., the acculturation gap-distress hypothesis; Lau et al., 2005; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996).

Although the preeminent explanation of immigrant family wellbeing, empirical support for the acculturation gap-distress hypothesis is mixed. Some studies find that gaps are associated only with heightened family conflict whereas others find they are solely associated with increased youth maladjustment; others find no evidence that gaps are linked to adverse outcomes and some find that gaps are assets (e.g., Bacallao & Smokowski, 2007; Telzer, 2010). Recently, researchers (e.g., Telzer, Costigan) have suggested that this range of findings exists because the hypothesis may be oversimplified and misstated as it ignores the impact of individual and contextual factors on outcomes. They argue that the gaps—which are dichotomized as match/mismatch and rest on Berry’s theory of static, mutually exclusive acculturative statuses of unknown personal relevance—may not accurately represent one’s complex relationship with the cultures of origin and residence, nor the complex nature of intrafamilial differences. In addition, the hypothesis generalizes one parent–child dyadic gap to an entire family, overlooking a potential system of complex relations and multifaceted gaps. Lastly, the hypothesis simplifies the complex, dynamic process of family adaptation, omitting the impact of context on functioning and ignoring family strengths to cope with the stress theoretically produced by gaps. Accordingly, Costigan (2010) has called for expanded study of acculturation gaps, suggesting the use of qualitative methods. Tardif-Williams and Fisher (2009) note that such methods “offer greater promise in clarifying the link between acculturation experiences and the quality of parent—child relationships” (p. 150).

In keeping with these critiques and suggestions, this study took a qualitative, strengths-based, emic approach to explore the meaning and operation of acculturation gaps and how variable outcomes may be partially explained through family resilience (i.e., “the ability for a family to withstand and rebound from disruptive life challenges”; Walsh, 2003, p. 1). Walsh’s model involves 3 overarching components, encompassing 9 processes that allow families to be resilient: (a) Belief systems – shared, facilitative beliefs, such as making meaning of adversity, having a positive outlook, and sharing transcendent, spiritual beliefs; (b) organizational patterns – flexibility, connected-
ness, and access to resources; and (c) *communication and effective problem solving* – clear and congruent messages, open emotional expression, and collaborative problem solving. These processes may allow a family with divergent practices, values, and identifications to communicate about, find meaning in, understand, and effectively cope with acculturation gaps. This study explores how theories of family resilience and acculturation gap-distress may inform one another to better explain the varied outcomes of immigrant families.

**Method**

The current study used qualitative case study methods to explore acculturation gaps in two Salvadoran American families, and the resilience processes through which the families navigated them. Though based in theories of acculturation gap-distress and family resilience, the study also used constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000) methods to further data analyses. Grounded theory aims to demonstrate relationships between concepts generated from data, rather than testing a priori hypotheses (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Constructivist grounded theory assumes that (a) multiple realities exist, (b) data reflect researchers’ and participants’ constructions of reality, and (c) researchers enter into and are affected by participants’ world (Charmaz, 2006).

**Participants**

To participate, families had to be Salvadoran American, consisting of two first-generation parents and two or more second-generation adolescent biological children. This allowed for three types of acculturation gaps to be identified—sibling, spouse, and parent–child. Families were excluded if they had other extended family members living in the home. A purposive sampling strategy was used to locate families. Key informants with ties to the Salvadoran community identified and approached families; if they expressed interest, the key informants shared their contact information and families were invited to participate. Of the six families contacted, three were excluded for not meeting the inclusion criteria listed above and one declined.

The two participating families will be referred to as the Flores and Gonzalez families. The Flores family consists of the following individuals: Ernesto, a 45-year-old utility engineer; Isabel, a 50-year-old elementary Spanish teacher; Roberto, a 19-year-old premed college freshman who moved into a dormitory during the study; and, Estefania, a 17-year-old high school junior. The Gonzalez family consists of five members: Chepe, a 60-year-old owner of a small construction company; Maria, a 42-year-old waitress who was a homemaker until her income was needed; Pai, a 21-year-old administrative assistant who moved 20 minutes away from home at age 18; Arturo, a 20-year-old student with autism who was unable to participate because of his functioning level; and, Andre, a 15-year-old high school sophomore with college aspirations. The Salvadoran civil war motivated all four parents to immigrate to the Baltimore–Washington corridor in the 1980s. The Flores family lives in a middle class suburban neighborhood in a small city (55.5% White, 25.3% Black, and 7.9% Latina/o), whereas the Gonzalez family lives in a lower-middle class urban neighborhood (21.1% Latina/o) of a large city (63.6% Black, 29.7% White, 4.2% Latina/o).

**Design**

Semistructured interviews were conducted with each family member individually and as a family to explore personal and family experiences (Charmaz, 2006; Weiss, 1994). An interview guide with suggested domains (i.e., acculturation, family resilience) was used to ensure full coverage of topics; however, the interviews and specific questions were shaped by participants’ responses, balancing directed questions, clarification probes, and open-ended follow-ups that allowed themes to emerge spontaneously. When themes emerged that had not arisen before, the first author incorporated them into later interviews. In this way, in addition to the direction suggested by the theories, themes were not limited to initial constructs (Charmaz, 2006).

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1 All names have been changed to pseudonyms the participants chose and all identifying information has been masked to protect the confidentiality of the participants.
Data Collection

After gaining consent from families by phone, the first author met with them in their homes to build rapport, answer questions, explain compensation ($10 per interview), and obtain written consent. Eight individual and two family interviews were conducted with each family in their homes and at public establishments (i.e., library, coffee shop), each lasting from 80 to 150 minutes over 8 months. One dyadic interview was also conducted to gather information about emerging themes. Interviews were conducted in English or Spanish by the first author, audio-recorded, and transcribed and analyzed in their original language (Tarozzi, 2013). Observations of participants’ behaviors and the setting were made in formal and informal interactions before, during, and after each interview, and recorded as field notes to enrich the interview data and provide context for interpretation. Individual interviews were conducted first to identify content to be discussed later as a family. Conducting sequential interviews allowed future data collection to be shaped in a self-correcting process (Charmaz, 2006). Individual interviews provided depth into members’ views; family interviews afforded observation of their spontaneous interactive communication styles rather than being deduced from individual interviews. These observations allowed for further understanding of the role structure, communication and interaction patterns, and belief system of the family unit, and corroborated members’ statements. This long-term involvement provided opportunity for rapport development, multiple interviews in varying constellations, and observations that allowed for rich data (Becker, 1970).

Data Analysis

The analysis was guided by a constructivist grounded theory approach, so that theory was generated from, rather than solely ascribed to, the data (Charmaz, 2006). A five-phase analytic process was utilized, consisting of the following: (a) description, the creation of comprehensive accounts for analysis by compiling interview transcripts, field notes of observations, and initial thoughts; (b) organization, the initial examination of the data through labeling each thought with a definition of what took place (i.e., its ‘initial code’); (c) connection, the development of preliminary constructs by using constant comparative methods (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to group frequent and significant initial codes into focused codes, compare them across interviews, and sort them into categories, later connecting categories to discover themes; (d) corroboration and legitimation, the development of theory by presenting interpretations and seeking feedback from participants and colleagues to corroborate and legitimize perspectives; and (e) representation of the account, the sharing of resulting understandings through embedding theory in its context and dissemination (Crabtree & Miller, 1999; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Trustworthiness

Because this study is qualitative, reliability and validity, familiar in quantitative methods, are more accurately viewed as trustworthiness, determined by the following: (a) credibility, accurate depiction of multiple realities; (b) transferability, applicability of findings to other settings; (c) dependability, consistency of findings; and (d) confirmability, objectivity in data collection and presentation. Credibility was established through prolonged engagement, persistent observation, negative case analysis, triangulation, and member checks. Transferability was improved with open questions and observations to provide rich detail. Dependability was bolstered through multiple interview methods and member checks. Confirmability was enhanced with broad, neutral, flexible questions, reflexivity, triangulation, and audits (Glesne, 2011; Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

Results

To explore acculturation gap navigation, gaps first had to be identified by comparing family members’ ‘acculturative statuses.’ They indicate members’ differences and similarities, and were described as causing various levels of contention. In keeping the article’s focus of gap
navigation, the gaps are only detailed briefly, followed by discussion of their navigation.

**Acculturation Statuses**

As discussed above, acculturation is a fluid process, constantly negotiated as individuals modify practices (i.e., behaviors), values (i.e., principles, beliefs), and identifications (i.e., sense of group belonging). Accordingly, an acculturative status was defined as an aggregate of current ascriptions to these cultural components. For example, if one primarily ascribes to components consistent with the culture of residence, one would be ‘assimilated.’ However, as is consistent with acculturation research critiques (see Chirkov, 2009; Tardif-Williams & Fisher, 2009), there were variations within members’ statuses in this study (e.g., some participated in ‘American’ practices while ascribing to ‘Salvadoran’ values). Further, members also endorsed practices and values that aligned with local, rather than national, cultures. Thus, their statuses were complex and not fully captured through traditional labels (e.g., assimilated, separated). Although members shared commonalities with their families, they also frequently endorsed differing values, practices, and identifications, forming many ‘acculturation gaps.’ These gaps could not be simplified to one overarching label because they were not consistent across practices, values, and identifications, or members. Although previous research only examined parent–child gaps, it was apparent that gaps occurred between all members (e.g., spousal, sibling, parent–child gaps).

Given these findings, the gaps explored here are those discrepancies in any identification, practice, or value between two or more family members (e.g., son speaks English, father speaks Spanish) rather than one overarching gap (e.g., separated parents, assimilated children). As many gaps related to local cultural differences, gaps were not restricted to national differences. To best convey the gaps, graphic depictions of the Flores family’s values, identifications, and practices are shown in Figures 1 through 3. The cultural elements were placed into categories that best match the way the families expressed them; these may be different in other families and conversations, and thus the reader is encouraged to use the figures to consider the specific gaps that had to be navigated in one family. The Gonzalez family had a similar amount, range, and distribution of gaps.

Generally, gaps were expressed in terms of overt practices, but were often, at root, reflective of underlying values or identifications. The Flores family provided an illustrative example as they talked about Spanish. Roberto (son) recalled, “I remember when we went to like a quinceñera and everyone there speaks Spanish except me and my sister. We always speak English. And my mom is like, ‘Start speaking Spanish. It looks bad.’ We’re like, ‘No, we’re American. We speak English.’” His mother responded, “When he was small I teach Spanish [to] both of them... Roberto has a problem to learn, but I still talking to him in Spanish... because... when you are in any office they need Spanish. That’s why I say to him, ‘You have to learn Spanish very well.’” His father then added, “He will be a doctor. They need to write in Spanish and speak very clear Spanish. That is why we push to him to speak more.” His mother again chimed in, “When he talk to the grandparents, they has a problem to understand him. ...I think speaking Spanish well he has more opportunities to get a very good job and also to understand the culture and be more close to the cousins.” She then addressed Roberto directly, stating, “You never has the chance—you can share with them but you has a problem to speak with [your cousin] and the rest of [the extended family].” Although the family discussed the gap in terms of a practice (i.e., speaking Spanish), much tension stemmed from underlying differences of values (i.e., cultural root maintenance, extended family communication) and identifications (i.e., American, Hispanic), and definitions of success.

Although this example—involving values, identifications, and practices—touches on crucial family issues, not all gaps did so and thus were not interpreted as equally problematic; practice differences were seen as less important when unrelated to values or identifications. For example,
example, Pai, the Gonzalez’s daughter, was the only family member to attend church, but the gap did not cause tension because the family did not think it reflected a value difference as they all valued spirituality. In the Flores family, parents attending church while the children did not caused tension because it was seen to reflect the family members’ differential values of religion. On the other hand, a gap that caused the Flores family tension was Pai’s tattoo, as it reflected differing value stances on traditional gender roles, maintaining appearances, and in Chepe’s eyes, family safety and religion. This issue was seen as rooted in national culture, as Chepe often spoke about differences in personal appearance and difficulty with changes in cultural gender roles. Pai explained, “Of course [my dad] was like, ‘Now why would you do that to your body? . . . The bible says you’re not supposed to do that. You’re a girl. You do not tat yourself up. That’s for gangsters . . . Only prisoners put tattoos on themselves and if you go to El Salvador and they see you tatted up, they’re gonna think you’re in the MS-13.’ And I’m like, ‘No, it’s just a flower.’”

**Family Resilience**

**Defining resilience.** Acculturation gap studies typically focus on child maladjustment, such as behavior problems, psychopathology, and academic issues (Telzer, 2010). However, despite their numerous gaps, the Flores and Gonzalez families show little sign of these negative outcomes and could be considered remarkably resilient, though they were not specifically

![Diagram of Flores family values](image-url)
selected as such. None of the children had been arrested, though the eldest children, Roberto Flores and Pai Gonzalez, exhibited some rebellion in adolescence (e.g., sneaking out, breaking curfew). None of the children reported more than minor alcohol and cannabis experimentation. Although Pai recounted becoming involved as a runner for a drug dealer for a few months, she ended her association after she was robbed and threatened, reporting no illegal activity since. No families or key informants reported the children experiencing mental health problems. The eldest children of each family were high school graduates; Roberto was in college and Pai was working and self-sufficient. The younger siblings were doing well in school and planning to pursue higher education. So, despite a few past difficulties, the children appeared to be functioning well.

The literature also associates gaps with negative familial outcomes, such as conflict (Telzer, 2010). Although both families reported some conflict occurring from gaps, it was limited and temporary. Both families were cohesive; all members reported valuing each other and family unity. Although Pai and her father experienced previous conflict, it was effectively navigated over time. During the study, the first author observed, and the families confirmed, they experienced little conflict. Members appeared comfortable expressing differences without apparent anger or distress during the interviews, and often chose to hold individual interviews in locations where others could hear their opinions. In this way it also appeared that the families were resilient.

**Component processes of resilience.** To navigate gaps with such resilience, both families used numerous strategies. Although Walsh’s model captured many of the strategies, additional processes were seen to confer resilience in each family as they worked around, through, and with these gaps. Some processes fit within Walsh’s model, whereas others expanded it (see Table 1).

**Family belief system.** The families held shared, facilitative beliefs that allowed for positive resolution of gaps and family growth. These included (a) making meaning of adver-
sity, (b) having a positive outlook, (c) open-mindedness, (d) putting family first, and (e) acceptance.5

Making meaning of adversity. Both families6 navigated gaps by making meaning of them, considering them manageable, pursuing explanatory attributions, and normalizing distress to allow growth. They made meaning in varying ways. Isabel Flores did so by articulating gaps’ importance: “To have a disagreement is ok because you is strong with your own ideas because everybody can defend his own point. ... If you want to have a healthy family, it’s ok to disagree.” “It’s like a learning lesson. It teaches you how important some details could be,” her daughter, Estefania, concurred. Andre Gonzalez reflected on reasons for gaps: “I kind of like them because they do reflect on our culture and where we come from so you gotta at least think about that fact, and, if you were the parents, what would you say in a situation. I do not see them as bad guys for saying those things; it’s what they were told when they were younger, so they tell us the same.” In this way, families positively reframed disagreements as reflections of culture.

Positive outlook. Both families navigated gaps with a positive outlook (i.e., envisioning a bright future because of, in spite of, or by effectively resolving gaps). The Flores daughter, Estefania, described a positive outlook that resulted because of gaps: “I feel like our differences do not separate us. I feel like they’re good for us. Our differences help us learn from each other. My parents are great.” They also held positive outlooks from

Table 1

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Process</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Family belief systems</td>
<td>a. Making meaning of adversity</td>
<td>Normalize/contextualize adversity; view as meaningful/ manageable; seek explanations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Positive outlook</td>
<td></td>
<td>Hope and optimism; encouragement</td>
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<tr>
<td>d. Open-mindedness(^5)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Being open to cultural differences</td>
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<tr>
<td>e. Family first(^6)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Prizing family above any querulous gaps</td>
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<tr>
<td>f. Acceptance(^6)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Cognitively tolerating reality of differences</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Family organizational patterns</td>
<td>a. Flexibility</td>
<td>Open to change; authoritative leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Connectedness</td>
<td></td>
<td>Mutual support, collaboration, &amp; commitment; respect for individual needs and differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Social/economic resources</td>
<td></td>
<td>Social networks; mentors; financial security</td>
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<td>d. Selective member involvement(^6)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Involving only the family members for whom the gap is causing tension to navigate the gap</td>
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<td>e. Mediators(^6)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Using impartial members to navigate gap</td>
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<tr>
<td>f. Understanding &amp; respecting limits(^6)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Refraining from practices that go against other family members’ underlying cultural values</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Family communication and effective problem solving processes</td>
<td>a. Clear, congruent messages</td>
<td>Clear, consistent words/actions; clarify ambiguity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Open emotional expression</td>
<td></td>
<td>Share full range of feelings with family; mutual empathy and tolerance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Collaborative problem-solving</td>
<td></td>
<td>Creative brainstorming; shared decisions/conflict resolution; goals focus/proactive stance</td>
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<tr>
<td>d. Discussion(^6)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Engaging in multisided conversation about gaps</td>
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<tr>
<td>e. Humor(^6)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Jokes to avoid arguments or share expectations</td>
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<tr>
<td>f. Empathy(^6)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Awareness of the strain gaps can cause others</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Escape(^6)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Avoiding or minimizing potential for gaps</td>
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Note. Although Walsh’s model included transcendence and spirituality as part of the belief system (i.e., the omitted “c”), interestingly, neither family expressed that their spiritual beliefs aided them in navigating acculturation gaps.

\(^5\) Open-mindedness, family first, and acceptance are additions to Walsh’s model.

\(^6\) Throughout this article, ‘both families’ indicates a theme that arose across all eight members of the families.
effectively resolving gaps. His mother, Maria, said it was easy to navigate gaps “because they have a culture that is Latino—our culture—and their culture, but they have adapted to both, so there is no problem.” There were exceptions to this; families portrayed some gaps as difficult and felt frustrated. Such feelings do not inevitably reflect a lack of resilience, as expressing them is useful (Walsh, 2003).

Open-mindedness. All members used open-mindedness (i.e., receptivity to a variety of beliefs and ways of life) to navigate gaps, a state of mind that was seen to fit within the family’s belief system. Open-mindedness allowed Isabel Flores to be okay with differences: “It’s not very important [to have] the same ideas. You can have different ideas about something, and I have different ideas also, and we still friends, we still talking,” she said to her children. She added, “I have the chance to meet and to learn from different people . . . you can pick different values from different people.” Open-mindedness allowed families to be open to their differences, as Roberto explained: “Everybody [in my family] has their own opinion, and . . . their own way of thinking. So I’m like, ‘All right, dude. That’s your thing. I’ll do my thing and you do your thing.’ That’s how I think about it.” By being open, families avoided some conflict that could arise from gaps.

Family first. Both families held the belief that the family unit was most important, prizing their wellbeing and happiness above querulous cultural differences. Parents often used this to navigate gaps with their children. For example, the Flores family got a dog for Estefania, although the family valued religion, they allowed Roberto to not serve as an altar boy. She added, “I have the chance to meet and to learn from different people . . . you can pick different values from different people.” Open-mindedness allowed families to be open to their differences, as Roberto explained: “Everybody [in my family] has their own opinion, and . . . their own way of thinking. So I’m like, ‘All right, dude. That’s your thing. I’ll do my thing and you do your thing.’ That’s how I think about it.” By being open, families avoided some conflict that could arise from gaps.

Family organizational patterns. The families were seen to organize in particular ways to navigate gaps, namely through (a) flexibility, (b) connectedness, (c) social/economic resources, (d) selective member involvement, (e) family first. Both families held the belief that the family unit was most important, prizing their wellbeing and happiness above querulous cultural differences. Parents often used this to navigate gaps with their children. For example, the Flores family got a dog for Estefania, although the family valued religion, they allowed Roberto to not serve as an altar boy. She added, “I have the chance to meet and to learn from different people . . . you can pick different values from different people.” Open-mindedness allowed families to be open to their differences, as Roberto explained: “Everybody [in my family] has their own opinion, and . . . their own way of thinking. So I’m like, ‘All right, dude. That’s your thing. I’ll do my thing and you do your thing.’ That’s how I think about it.” By being open, families avoided some conflict that could arise from gaps.
mediators, and (f) understanding and respecting limits.  

**Flexibility.** Both families used flexibility (i.e., adaptively organizing to ‘bounce forward’) to navigate gaps. Members were flexible by partially endorsing disparate practices, values, and identifications. For example, the Flores parents valued religion, which Roberto denounced, and so his sister Estefania was flexible in her practice of religion to minimize conflict. Adapting to context also conferred flexibility. Parents changed their expectations depending on contexts (e.g., expecting children to greet relatives in certain ways in El Salvador, but not in the U.S.), and children adapted appropriately. Andre described adapting his practices and identifications to navigate differing cultures: “What happens in the house is more of a Salvadoran thing and mostly Spanish is exchanged—maybe with a few English words thrown in—and we’re raised in here as Salvadorans, but once we step out the door and go to school, we’re Americans.”

**Connectedness.** Both families expressed the importance of being connected to navigate gaps. Ernesto Flores (father) echoed a sentiment expressed by all members: “How I identify my family? We are a family that has to be united. . . . If I’m outside of my family, I see a nice family. It’s not because it’s my family, but because we stay together. . . . That is why we try to tell them that the biggest value is to stay together. Any problem we take care of together.”

When gaps arose, families used connectedness to work through them. His son explained, “I think we have a very strong bond. We can get through anything. I feel like I can talk to them about anything. . . . I can tell [my sister] anything and she can tell me anything. Same thing with my mom or my dad.”

**Social and economic resources.** Both families used tangible and intangible resources to navigate or avoid gaps. Economic resources were used to decrease their likelihood. For example, the Gonzalez parents were appalled with the U.S. education system, concerned that Pai and Andre would acculturate to public schools; they thus used their resources to try to reduce the likelihood they would adopt those values and practices. Maria explained, “[We sent them to] private schools because at the public schools there is no order, no education. . . . Private schools are a little more orderly.” Though the children were exposed to (and Pai adopted) values and practices of which their parents disapproved, the Gonzalez’s financial resources allowed them to feel they decreased this likelihood and mitigated potential conflicts. Social support resources were important to all members, especially the children, to validate and support them when gaps arose in the families. Estefania explained how her support system helped her deal with gaps: “It really depends on what [the gap] is. If it’s something that I feel like I can talk to [my family] about, then I’ll tell them. But usually I talk to my friends because they’re easier to talk with.”

**Selective member involvement.** Both families often only involved those for whom the gap caused tension, keeping peace by avoiding needless involvement. For example, curfew disputes typically involved daughters and fathers, as daughters’ practice of going out went against fathers’ values (e.g., family safety, gender roles – marianismo). They often negotiated the gap alone. Estefania explained, “With the curfew thing, it was mainly my dad [who was involved] because he sort of takes control in those situations. . . . My mom was like, ‘Whatever agreement you come to.’ . . . It usually stays between the two people that have the conflict.” Selective involvement also avoided argument escalation. Andre noted, “I didn’t want to defend either side ‘cause I didn’t want to, you know, choose a side and then get hated by the other, so I kinda stayed neutral.” Similarly, Estefania observed: “As much as I agree with my brother, I know that when he’s having an argument with my dad or mom, it’s not really my concern. . . . You do not really want to interfere because sometimes interfering might make the problem more difficult than it has to be.”

**Mediators.** Although families valued selective member involvement, there were times when they navigated gaps with others’ help. Mediators were used when the gap was characterized by significant conflict and the mediator felt invested in its resolution. For example, when Pai had a boy over without permission, defying her father’s cultural gender role expectations and values, comunicating...
tion disintegrated; Maria mediated to resolve the conflict. “My husband was so hurt, he did not speak to her. . . . At the time he told her that she did not have a dad! . . . I told her, ‘You have to look for an opportunity to speak with [him].’ . . . Then they began by talking slowly.” Maria also helped the two work around gaps by hiding Pai’s actions from Chepe. Pai noted:

In Spanish families whatever the dad says goes . . . . But my mom was there for me. One summer I was not allowed to go out. I couldn’t do anything. But my dad would go to work and my mom would say, ‘All right, you can leave.’ . . . One time I was coming in the front door and my dad was coming in the back. And my mom was in the middle. She was like, ‘You gotta go upstairs now!’ . . . It was always like that! She always covered for me!

Thus, members, at times, involved themselves in others’ gaps, ameliorating the conflict.

Understanding and respecting limits. Members refrained from practices that went against others’ values to avoid conflicts. Children used this when they felt their parents would not approve of actions that defied their cultural values. As Estefania remarked, “I know when to pick my battles.” This process involved understanding limits and their reasons. Andre explained, “I put myself in their shoes, like that’s what they were born with and I cannot change that.” He gave advice to other second-generation youth: “Once you go into your parents’ shoes, you realize they want the best for you . . . When I am mad, I picture what my mom and dad are going through, and then you’re like, that makes a lot of sense. . . . [They are] not just doing it to get a rise out of you, not to make you mad—they’re doing it because there’s a bigger purpose in it.” This process was common: Roberto attended church though he didn’t value religion; Pai limited the amount of time she went out at night when she moved back home though she didn’t endorse her father’s value of traditional gender roles. In some instances, however, the children struggled to respect limits that conflicted with strong values; thus, problem solving became necessary.

Family communication and problem solving. Families reported communicating about and problem-solving gaps through (a) clear, congruent messages, (b) open emotional expression, (c) collaborative problem solving, (d) discussion, (e) humor, and (f) empathy.

Clear and congruent messages. As unspoken topics can cause uncertainty and anxiety, clear communication was key to both families’ gap navigation. It helped senders relay expectations and aided receivers to comprehend their roots, fostering understanding. Pai explained, “I really value—back when I was younger I didn’t understand it, but my father would talk to me. He would let me know where he came from and would let me know where we stand at.” In the Flores family, the parents first discussed messages and Isabel relayed them in English because their son did not speak Spanish fluently and his father was not comfortable speaking English. Ernesto clarified the reason for this communication chain: “Reason is because we do not want miscommunication with the guys, okay? If we miss the communication, we have lost everything.” The parents also expressed a need for congruent messages, presenting a united front even when navigating spousal gaps. Maria Gonzalez explained: “We never go around fighting. We discuss, I mean, we communicate. Communication is very important in the marriage. Every couple has their little arguments about little things but we try not to argue in front of children.”

Open emotional expression. Both families used open emotional expression (i.e., sharing one’s feelings so that emotions are not stifled, potentially intensifying and creating conflict) to navigate gaps, but its use varied. Although parents contended they encouraged open expression and were observed to share feelings openly, children reported that sharing gap-related emotions depended on how they believed they would be interpreted. They shared positive feelings, but were cautious in sharing emotions that could cause disappointment, lead to an argument, or might be misunderstood. Although children were not always fully open with parents, they were with one another. Asked with whom he shares these gap-related emotions, Andre replied, “My sister. We have a close relationship. She can tell me anything and I’ve told her things.”

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9 Discussion, humor, and empathy are new to Walsh’s model.
Collaborative problem solving. Both families collaborated in problem solving, sharing decision-making to negotiate gaps by identifying root values that caused actions to be contested and devising related solutions. The families spoke extensively about this and were frequently observed doing so. For example, the Flores family identified the root value of one of Estefania’s contested actions (staying out past 9 p.m.) to be concerns over family safety, based on experiences in El Salvador, and devised a solution that addressed the value rather than just the action (she could stay out with a chaperone and check in). Problem solving was typically reported as the first process attempted to navigate gaps. Maria Gonzalez contended that they “try to resolve all problems together” and her husband stated that this kept gaps from becoming difficult: “There isn’t room for difficulties because there are problems but we do not let them turn into difficulties. We look for solutions. . . . We’ll resolve them in some way.”

The Flores daughter explained: “[We] just do not like conflict and separation in general. If we have a problem then we have to deal with it. It’s one of those, ‘Okay sit down and talk about it, get through it.’” Although solutions were not always identified and other strategies were necessary, problem solving was always attempted, explained her mother: “We has to see all together if we can fix. . . . If we cannot fix, probably it’s gone or probably it’s there, but the most important is to see if we can fix it.”

Discussion. When members sought to understand and be understood, they often had a conversation. Discussion was useful as it fostered understanding to reduce tension, but did not require a potentially unattainable resolution. Parents explained this as coming from their own acculturation, modifying their parenting styles from the authoritarian style of their childhoods to a more authoritative style they witnessed in the U.S. Isabel explained: “When they are little, whatever you say is okay, but [then] they change. . . . They do not agree with something, they’re arguing. . . . I think it is a good way because the parents cannot say you has to do this and this and no discussion. We has to discuss about that. Sometimes I do not feeling comfortable, but either way I say, this is the democratic way.” Discussion resolved tension from gaps, as Pai expounded upon her relationship with her father: “I just realized ‘that’s my dad and I need to speak to him.’ . . . I should listen to him, not overpower him and try to show him that he’s wrong all the time. . . . So I just kind of let him say what he has to say and let me say what I have to say.” When beliefs were strong enough to exclude all other viewpoints, no discussion took place, however. For example, the Flores parents expected their children to attend college, but never discussed it with them because they strongly valued education. Similarly, Pai dating was never discussed in her family. Andre summed it up: “The thing about my parents is if they have their conclusion, there’s no changing it. . . . You cannot discuss it. If their answer’s no, it’s no; if it’s yes, it’s yes.”

Humor. Both families also coped with gaps by using jokes to (a) avoid arguments from gaps that they didn’t plan to resolve, and (b) share feelings and expectations about gaps in a non-threatening way. For instance, Estefania joked about her father “becoming Salvadoran,” but it was clear to them that neither planned to change their identifications to resolve the gap. Pai recounted her father joking about her tattoos to indirectly tell her to cover them. Andre explained how humor relayed disapproval: “[My sister] was wearing a jacket my dad hated and he just kept telling jokes about it . . . She was actually laughing and eventually she just took the jacket off because it was just going to keep going.” Humor helped families avoid arguments and communicate expectations.

Empathy. Finally, families were cognizant of the strain gaps caused and were mindful to minimize it. For example, though Roberto lamented his mother ‘pushing’ her culture on him, he recognized the difficulty the gaps caused her: “She feels that because we live in America and the American influence is swiping everything we know about our culture and where we’re from. She feels like if we get older and [we] get married and have kids, [they] will not know how to speak Spanish . . . where they’re from [and] basically nothing about their family, so . . . she’s afraid.”

Roberto then assuaged her fears through theoretical compromises (e.g., if he had children, his mother would enculturate them). Isabel also recognized her children’s strain: “I try to be open-minded with them because . . . they has to deal with other cultures . . . because they see
some people acting different. I try to understand the most I can. I always thinking about it and I say well it’s important to learn good things from different cultures. Also keep in mind we are Hispanic and we have values too . . . . But probably for them it’s not easy.” By being empathic toward others’ gap-related strain, members were tolerant, potentially decreasing conflict.

**Escaping gaps.** An additional component was seen to expand Walsh’s model: escape. Families escaped gaps by minimizing members’ exposure to disparate values or practices, and by hiding discrepant practices. For instance, the Gonzalez parents tried to minimize exposure to differing ways of life by sending the children to private school and living in a community highly populated by Latina/o immigrants. The Flores family attempted the same by having similar family friends. They also hid their activities. For example, Pai avoided conflict by not sharing her practices, such as not telling her family about going to night clubs or introducing her boyfriend. She also physically removed herself to avoid gap conflict: “I moved out for the simple fact that my parents, their values were different. . . . My parents were teaching me the way they were taught. I was a female, so that’s not what girls do. Especially in El Salvador, girls stay, learn to do home work. . . . So that was one of the facts of why I left the house at such a young age.”

**Discussion**

This study expands knowledge of the complexity of acculturation gaps and their relation to wellbeing by investigating the diverse ways in which families (a) articulate and understand both acceptable and contentious gaps and (b) successfully navigate gaps. Members primarily explained gaps in terms of overt practices rather than values or identifications. However, only practices undergirded by value or identification differences were seen as possibly problematic or contentious. Although this notion is widely recognized in clinical psychology and is often a key focus of marriage and family therapy, understanding and conceptualizing practices as indicative of underlying values or identifications is not explicitly discussed in acculturation psychology. Families navigated the gaps through processes that fit into Walsh’s family resilience model. At times, gap navigation meant changing one’s practices, values, or identifications to align with others’ expectations (i.e., accommodating), whereas at other times it meant convincing others to change their practices, values, or identifications (i.e., competing). Sometimes navigation meant compromising or identifying a different solution (i.e., compromising, collaborating), and sometimes it meant simply accepting the differences that occur (i.e., tolerating).

Although this study expands Walsh’s original nine-process model, identifying 10 other ways families navigated acculturation gaps, it is important to note that not all processes were used to navigate each gap. Families considered which practices, values, and identifications were merely novel or disparate and which were inherently negative or harmful, and then chose navigation strategies based on this assessment. For example, open-mindedness, acceptance, and flexibility were only used if the gap was viewed as benign because these processes involve tolerating a gap’s existence rather than resolving it. If gaps were viewed as harmful, processes that involved competing or collaborating (e.g., problem-solving, mediators, escape) were used instead. Isabel explained, “The thing is if they do not do nothing wrong. This is the way I always take care. If I see them copying something bad, I go in to stop them because this is the way it is working for me. If they copying something good, it’s ok. Bring to us! If they learn something very good, it’s not bad for the family.” Just as Folkman and Moskowitz (2004) note that flexibility in the use of strategies is most important for effective coping, it is likely that the diversity of the families’ navigation strategies aided them to navigate gaps flexibly, enhancing their resilience.

**Limitations**

There are a number of study limitations. Although its qualitative aspects have many benefits, including socioculturally situated representations of experiences (Glesne, 2011), the sample was homogeneous and small. Although saturation of the themes was reached across individual and family interviews, and confirmed in observations and the dyadic interview, additional strategies could be found in other families. Although more research among diverse Latina/o families is needed to generalize these
findings, the families’ experiences, grounded in their context and history, express their own lived experiences and thus represent real variability and validity. Although these specific experiences may not be wholly generalizable, the processes may extend beyond these families. It is left to the reader to evaluate the utility of case studies for their settings and situations (Crabtree & Miller, 1999; Schwandt, 1997). More research is necessary to determine whether theory gleaned from this study holds true in other immigrant families and under what conditions.

The positionality of the interviewer may have influenced responses; however, long-term data collection, time spent building rapport, and training and experience should have decreased the possibility of data alteration (Hopkins, 2007). Families gave all indications of being candid, honest, and frank, openly describing negative and positive experiences. Both families expressed confidence, upon seeing ongoing products, that they were being accurately represented.

We acknowledge that with more than 200 definitions of culture in extant literature (Lonner, 1994), the way in which this study broadly defined culture—as the identifications, practices, and values held by a group of people (Schwartz et al., 2010)—may not capture all readers’ narrower definitions. Further, because we found many differences within the families also related to local cultures, we did not restrict gaps to national cultures. Although it is not possible to fully disentangle acculturation gaps from generational gaps that occur in families with U.S.-born parents, we sought to accurately present gaps in the way these families perceived and explained them.

Finally, this research solely focused on families, rather than on their contexts, and did not account for the interaction of family and individual goals with the community’s openness and acceptance to explain their wellbeing (Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001). Further, the exploratory nature of this study does not allow causal statements to be made as it focused on lived experiences as opposed to experimental manipulation and control. There are many ways in which acculturation gaps and family resilience may be related to wellbeing: each may be related directly (see Telzer, 2010 and Walsh, 2003) or the relation between gaps and wellbeing may be mediated or moderated by resilience processes. Although this research only explored the latter, it provides important insight by exploring how families successfully deal with acculturation gaps.

**Future Directions**

This study identified a large set of processes that seem to aid acculturation gap navigation and presented a novel method of study. Both theoretical insights and methods should be further explored. Beyond addressing the limitations of this research, there are specific findings that have yet to be explored in the literature and deserve investigation. First, although families described gaps in terms of practices, only those related to values or identifications were considered problematic or contentious; replication of this finding is key to understanding which gaps are most important to navigate. Second, a total of 18 processes appeared to confer resilience in gap navigation; these processes should be further examined as they could potentially inform programs to enhance family resilience. Third, families determined which gaps were helpful, benign, or harmful to decide which process they would use to navigate gaps; thus, a better understanding of how families determine the quality of gaps is necessary to understand differential gap navigation.

As the concepts that initially emerged from this study are better understood, longitudinal, mixed-method research with a greater number of families would be ideal. Future research that combines in-depth interviews with intensive participant observations over families’ lifetimes would help identify times when acculturation gaps appear and dissipate, and better describe the ways in which families work through gaps in the moment. Including measures of wellbeing would strengthen the tie of these processes believed to assist families in navigating acculturation gaps to positive family and youth outcomes. Finally, by measuring these variables at a variety of time points, the causal relation between these variables and the supposition that resilience processes mediate or moderate the relation between gaps and family outcomes could be tested.
Concluding Remarks

For these families, acculturation gap navigation was far more complex and positive than the current literature leads us to believe. Families assess the quality of cultural differences and use diverse processes to navigate the gaps depending upon the assessment. In this way, they continually change in nonuniform and nonlinear ways. Accordingly, they simultaneously grow individually and as members of a family, permitting family change. This process, while complex, is neither inherently negative nor harmful; instead, it can be a healthy response to a new context, as indicated by the numerous processes in which these families engage to “bounce forward.”

This study is novel in many ways. It applies the concept of family resilience to the study of acculturation gaps through in-depth interviews with family systems. It identifies multiple gaps occurring within families, expanding acculturation gaps to the family system. It provides insight into how family resilience aids families to navigate acculturation gaps. And, it shows many ways in which families may use resilient processes as a form of spontaneous prevention (Brodsky & DeVet, 2000). In many ways, these families’ gap navigation supports the APA Presidential Task Force’s (2012) claim that immigrants are remarkably resilient. The model of family resilience found here, if generalized, could provide a model for other families with acculturation gaps.

Abstract

A la luz de hallazgos mezclados con respecto a la valencia de resultados asociados con las diferencias de aculturación de familias inmigrantes de generación mixta, esta investigación ha adoptado una metodología cualitativa con la intención de explorar la rica complejidad de estas diferencias de aculturación y su navegación. A través de entrevistas semiestructuradas de forma individual, diádica, y familiar con dos familias inmigrantes salvadoreñas de generación mixta que viven en los Estados Unidos, este estudio exploró las formas en que las familias (a) describieron y comprendieron sus diferencias de aculturación, (b) decidieron si una diferencia era benigna, problemática, o útil para la familia, y (c) navegaron las diferencias según sus valencias determinadas. Las narrativas individuales y familiares fueron analizados con “constructivist grounded theory,” guiado por las teorías de “acculturation gap-distress” (Lau et al., 2005; Portes y Rumbaut, 1996) y la capacidad de recuperación familiar (i.e., “resiliencia familiar,” Walsh, 2003). Esta investigación reveló que pueden existir diferencias de aculturación entre todos los miembros de la familia y que si bien las familias describieron diferencias en términos de prácticas evidentes, sólo aquellas prácticas discrepantes que se relacionaron con diferencias de valores o de identificaciones se consideraron potencialmente problemáticas. Las familias fueron vistas utilizando sus sistemas de creencias, organización, estrategias de comunicación y de resolución de problemas, y los métodos de evacuación para navegar con eficacia estas diferencias en 18 distintas maneras, dependiendo de las valencias de las diferencias. Este estudio indica que (a) un modelo de resiliencia familiar puede ser aplicado al estudio de las diferencias de aculturación, (b) la ampliación del referido modelo aplicado a las diferencias de aculturación puede ser indicada, y (c) de tal modelo puede dar una idea de por qué algunas familias con diferencias de aculturación sufran resultados negativos, mientras que otros prosperan.

References


