The Implications of Learning English on Family Dynamics among Hispanic Immigrants

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Sociology and Spanish Honors Senior Thesis
Undergraduate Research Conference
April 23, 2010
How does immigrating to the United States and learning the English language impact family relationships among Hispanic immigrants living in the New England region?
Background: Literature Review

- Learning English and cultural assimilation (Olsen 2000, Fillmore 2000)
- Pace of language acquisition (Worthy 2006, Martinez, McClure, and Eddy 2009)
- Loss of native language (Olsen 2000, Worthy and Rodríguez-Galindo 2006)
- Language brokering (Martinez, McClure, and Eddy 2009)
Participant Characteristics

- Participants recruited using snowball sampling techniques

- Sample: 10 participants
  - Gender: 5 Males, 5 Females
  - Average age: 26
  - Countries of Origin: Mexico, El Salvador, Dominican Republic, Columbia, Bolivia, Peru
  - Years living in America: 4 to 18
    - One participant was born in the U.S. (her parents immigrated from Ecuador a few years prior to her birth)
  - 8 participants are members of the UNH community and 2 work at a business in Keene, NH

- Main analysis focuses on 7 core participants
Research Method

- Semi-structured face-to-face interviews
  - Audio-recorded
  - Average duration: 45 minutes
- Participants assigned pseudonyms
- Analysis: Interviews were transcribed and coded according to key themes
Main Themes

- Reasons for Migrating to the U.S.
- Daily life as a Hispanic Immigrant
- English Language Acquisition
- Loss of Native Language
- Bilingualism
- **Family Dynamics**
RESULTS

1. Changes in Family Relationships
2. Language Brokering
Changes in Family Relationships Associated with Immigration

- **Extended Family:**
  
  “[Immigrating to the United States] changed my relationships with people from back home. I don’t think for good because it kind of like pulled me apart from them.” - Sofía

- **Nuclear Family:**

  [Immigrating to America] made me closer to [my parents]. They were my family, the only people I could talk to.” - José
Changes in Family Relationships as a Result of Learning English

- Reversal of typical parent-child roles

“My parents’ English is very limited and so since I started learning English or started becoming more fluent or perhaps more proficient than my dad, then I start taking that role of making appointments, calling the cable company, calling for I don’t know the doctor, going to places with them so that I could like be the one in charge of it… It made me more of like a, um I don’t know, more of a leader at home.” - José

“When I was doing high school, my mom was trying to take like an English course… I would help her with her homework, versus like the other way around.” - Pedro
Translating for Family Members

“Whenever [my parents] get like have to go talk to a phone company or something, or they when they have like a bill or something that they don’t really quite understand, I would have to translate that for them.” - Pedro

“I’m [my dad’s] secretary, to be honest with you. I write the estimates, the contracts, I speak with the other owners, yeah. Even now, I can be like in class and he’ll leave me a voicemail. I’ll get back to him, write down the numbers, I’ll call the person, so I’m there, I’m translating for him.” - María

“Often times I’m at work and my mom is out somewhere trying to do something or she could be at the bank and she will call me from her cell phone, ‘hey’ and put me on speakerphone, ‘hey can you translate for me?’” - Carlos
Feelings about Translating for Family Members

“At first I would get annoyed and I’m not going to lie to you, when [translating] happens so frequent, I do get annoyed. You know but, other than that, I feel like I have to… I feel like um [my parents] rely on me heavily and like I have to be there for them, you know.” - María

“When [your family members are] going through a hard time you have to be there to translate. So it gives you more responsibility and makes you more mature because you have to solve problems for them and sometimes you have to think on the top of your head for them, you have to make decisions.” - Sofía
Discussion/Conclusion

- Relationships with extended family members tended to drift apart after immigrating to the United States, while relationships with nuclear family members became stronger.

- As their proficiency in English surpassed their parents, some participants reported taking on more household responsibilities.
  - Reversal of typical parent-child roles

- Translating for parents occurs frequently.
  - Participants view language brokering as both positive and negative.
Limitations and Future Research

- Non-random, non-representative sample
  - Results cannot be generalized

- Unit of analysis
  - Shift from families to individuals
    - Unable to access the desired population due to lack of parent interest
  - More research needed on the family as a group

- Education level
  - A possible source of bias

- Location
  - Future research should study other geographical locations in the U.S. that have small Hispanic/immigrant/minority populations
Acknowledgements

A special thanks to:

- My thesis advisor, Professor Sharyn Potter, Department of Sociology
- Professor Michelle Dillon, Department of Sociology
- Professor John Chaston, Department of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures
- Sean McGhee, Director of the Office of Multicultural Student Affairs (OMSA)
- The Hamel Center for Undergraduate Research
Sources