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# I Felt Like My Heart Was Staying Behind: Psychological Implications of Family Separations & Reunifications for Immigrant Youth

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Carola Suárez-Orozco,<sup>1</sup> Hee Jin Bang,<sup>2</sup>  
and HaYeon Kim<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Though many transnational families undergo profound transformations that are often complicated by extended periods of separation between loved ones, it is challenging to establish a sense of prevalence of family separations as well as their effects on youth. Utilizing the Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation data with 282 newcomer adolescents from China, Central America, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Mexico, the authors report that nearly three quarters of the participants had been separated from one or both parents for extended periods. Results of general linear model (GLM) analyses indicate that children who were separated from their parents were more likely to report symptoms of anxiety and depression in the initial years after migrating than children who had not been separated; follow-up analyses 5 years later show that symptoms had abated. Qualitative data from youth and parents shed light on the experience of separations and reunifications.

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<sup>1</sup>New York University, New York

<sup>2</sup>William T. Grant Foundation, New York

## Corresponding Author:

Carola Suárez-Orozco, Applied Psychology, New York University, 239 Greene Street, No. 414,  
New York, NY 10003

Email: [cso2@nyu.edu](mailto:cso2@nyu.edu)

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Globalization is transforming the shape of the family (Foner, 2009; Mahalingam, Balan, & Molina, 2009; United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2009). In the United States today, more than 13% of population are foreign-born (Foner, 2009) and well over a fifth of the nation's children are growing up in immigrant homes (Hernandez, Denton, & MaCartney, 2007; Mather, 2009). Worldwide, more than 214 million are immigrants and refugees, many of whom leave behind loved ones in their home countries, including children, spouses, and extended family members (UNDP, 2009). Often in the process of migration, families endure prolonged periods of separation before they are reunited again (Suárez-Orozco, Todorova, & Louie, 2002).

Increasingly, the world over, experiences of transnational families can be characterized by "separation and reunification of different members of the family unit over time" (Tyyska, 2007, p. 91). This practice of "'familyhood' even across the national borders" (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002, p. 3) has been well documented by sociologists (Dreby, 2007, 2009; Foner, 2009; Glick-Schiller & Fouron, 1992; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2003) and economists (Abrego, 2009; Suro, 2003), but has largely failed to be noted in the developmental literature. There are a wide variety of transnational family configurations. Most typically, migrations take place in a "stepwise" fashion with one family member going ahead, later to be followed by others (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997; Orellana, Thorne, Chee, & Lam, 2001). Historically, the pattern has been of the father going ahead, establishing himself while sending remittances home, and then bringing the wife and children as soon as it was financially possible. Today, the first world's demand for service workers draw mothers from a variety of developing countries often to care for "other people's children" (Gratton, 2007; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2003; Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997). In cases where mothers initiate migrations, they leave their children in the care of extended family such as grandparents or aunts along with fathers if they remain locally and are still part of the family. In many other cases, both parents go ahead, leaving the children in the care of extended family (Bernhard, Landolt, & Goldring, 2006; Foner, 2009; Scalabrini Migration Center, 2003). Upper middle-class families from countries such as Hong Kong and Taiwan send middle and high school-aged students to study abroad as "astronaut kids," living with mothers whereas fathers remain in the homeland (Ong, 1999; Waters, 2002) or as "parachute kids," living with

extended or fictive kin while the both parents remains in the homeland (Ong, 1999; Zhou, 2009). Another long documented practice is that of children being sent back to the homeland to be taken care of by grandparents; typically, unruly adolescents have been sent back to be resocialized by their grandparents (Foner, 2009; Smith, 2006), but increasingly, infants and toddlers are being sent back to be cared for by extended family while parents work (Bohr, Whitfield, & Chan, 2009; Gaytán, Xue, & Yoshikawa, 2006). In recent years, families with undocumented parents have involuntarily been wrenched apart by workplace as well as in-home raids conducted by immigration authorities (Capps, Castañeda, Chaudry, & Santos, 2007; Chaudry, Pedroza, Castañeda, Santos, & Scott, 2010).

When families separate, they often expect to reunite soon. However, the reunification of the entire family often takes many years, especially when complicated by financial hurdles and convoluted immigration regulations (Bernhard et al., 2006; Foner, 2009; Menjívar, 2006; Menjívar & Abrego, 2009; Simpao, 1999). When it is time for the children to arrive, they may be brought to the new land all together, but often, they are brought in one at a time (Bernhard et al., 2006). Although parents may maintain contact during the separation period through letters, phone calls, or personal visits and contribute to the material well-being of their children, these separation-reunification processes involve difficult psychological experiences for the children during the separation phase as well as after the reunification (Falicov, 2007; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2002). For the children, these migrations result in two sets of disruptions in attachments—first from the parent, and then from the caretaker to whom the child has become attached during the parent-child separation (Ambert & Krull, 2006; Bernhard et al., 2006; Dreby, 2007; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2002; Wong, 2006).

## **Immigrant Family Separations Research**

While the discipline of developmental psychology has been slow to realize the number of children and youth caught up in transnational family constellations, sociologists and clinical psychologists have been documenting this phenomenon over the last decade or so.

From the sociological data, several patterns emerge. The clearest evidence points to the disruption to family relationships. In broad strokes, this research—based largely on transnational studies conducted on Central American and Mexican families during the separation phase in the country of origin and during the reunification stage in the receiving country—reveal some fairly consistent insights (Foner, 2009). During the separations phase,

children appear to adjust more easily to the father being away, perhaps because this is consistent with gender expectations (Dreby, 2007). However, when the mother or both parents are away, the children often attach to the substitute caretaker. Mothers (more so than fathers) often maintain regular contact with their children (Abrego, 2009; Dreby, 2009) attempting to maintain “emotional intimacy from a distance” (Dreby, 2009, p. 34). Younger children often begin to emotionally withdraw from their mothers, and adolescents typically either become quite independent or act out aggressively (Dreby, 2009; Smith, 2006). Thus, maintaining long-distance emotional intimacy over an extended physical absence is challenging. During the reunification stage, children and youth often report ambivalence about leaving behind their beloved extended family, caretakers, and friends and are anxious about meeting members of the biological family who have become strangers over the prolonged separation (Foner, 2009; Menjívar & Abrego, 2009). Parents often report struggles with asserting their authority and frustration that their financial and emotional sacrifices are not fully appreciated by their children (Abrego, 2009; Dreby, 2009; Foner, 2009; Menjívar & Abrego, 2009; Zhou, 2009).

There is also a body of literature derived from clinical reports, which points to a pattern of family conflict during the family reunification phase (Glasgow & Gouse-Shees, 1995; Sciarra, 1999). This literature suggests that over time, the family may have evolved in such a way that excludes the parent who has been away, making reunification of the family system difficult (Falicov, 2007; Partida, 1996). Parents tend to expect their children to be grateful for their sacrifices but often find that their children are ambivalent about joining their parents in the migratory process (Boti & Bautista, 1999; Rousseau et al., 2009; Sciarra, 1999). Also, children may be disappointed for how their real parents turn out to be, as compared to their fantasies and expectations about the life in the United States (Artico, 2003). After the long separation period, youth left behind feel competitive with siblings born in the host country for the mother’s affection (Arnold, 2006), and parents often report having difficulties in establishing functional intrafamily relationships (Arnold, 2006; Boti & Bautista, 1999; Sewell-Coker, Hamilton-Collins, & Fein, 1985). The longer the separation they underwent, the less likely adolescents report being able to identify with their parents or being willing to conform to their rules at the time of reunification (Smith, Lalonde, & Johnson, 2004). Reestablishing control and authority may be complicated by parental guilt, which may result in inconsistencies and overindulgence (Arnold, 1991; Burke, 1980). A “continual pattern of rejection and counter-rejection” may emerge, leading families to seek treatment (Glasgow & Gouse-Shees, 1995).

Thus, many reunified families experience tensions, conflicts, and adjustment difficulties particularly during the phase of adolescent development (Crawford-Brown & Melrose, 2001; Lashley, 2000).

Although the research from sociological and clinical perspective is useful, there is more to learn about the family separation phenomenon and its impact on immigrant youth's lives. Particularly, much of the richest sociological research on the phenomenon has been conducted only with mothers (e.g., Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997; Levitt, 2001) or with single country samples (e.g., Dominicans—Levitt, 2001; Mexicans—Dreby, 2007, 2009; Salvadorans—Abrego, 2009). The clinical literature does not shed light on understanding the effects of separations on normally functioning families, as only those who are in need of treatment are represented, thus increasing the danger of possibly overpathologizing the outcome of separations. The data are generally complications of reunifications rather than on separations. Moreover, to date, these studies have largely been qualitative. Thus, while we have some insights into the effects of transnationalism on immigrant families (Falicov, 2007; Foner, 2009), we know little about normative developmental outcomes for immigrant youth from diverse backgrounds.

*Prevalence.* Also very limited are the data indicating the prevalence and cross-cultural patterns of immigrant family separations. In a previous study examining the patterns of separations and reunifications of 385 adolescent newcomers from China, Central America, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and, Mexico, nearly 85% of the participants were found to have undergone separation from at least one parent (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2002). In a more recent study conducted in Montreal, a similar pattern was found (Rousseau et al., 2009). Among 254 first- and second-generation immigrant origin high school students from the Philippines and the Caribbean, approximately 62% of the Filipino origin participants and 38% of the Caribbean origin participants had experienced separations. It is important to note that this study did not disaggregate by generation. Since separations are unlikely to occur in the second generation, this is a low estimate of what the separation rates would be for a first-generation sample. In a nationally representative survey ( $N = 1,772$ ) that restricted its sample to documented immigrants (in contrast to the two studies noted above which included unauthorized immigrants), nearly a third of the participants between ages 6 to 18 had been separated from at least one parent for 2 or more years. Notably, the rates of separation were highest for children of Latin American origin (Gindling & Poggio, 2009). Thus, in keeping with reports in other postindustrial settings (UNDP, 2009), separations from biological parents appear to be quite frequent among first-generation immigrants in North America.

*Psychological well-being of children and youth.* Family contexts have been well established to have critical implications for the functioning of children and youth (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Small & Covalt, 2006). Disruptions in family systems are likely to have implications for the well-being of children. A number of clinical studies (conducted with Caribbean families in Canada and Great Britain, along with a few studies on Caribbean and Latino families in United States) show that there are substantial negative psychological repercussions for immigrant children and youth who have been separated from their parents. These studies uniformly point to complications occurring both during the separation phase when the child is left with relatives and during the reunification phase when the child joins the parents. While apart from the parent, clinical studies report that children and youth may feel abandoned and may respond with despair and detachment (Artico, 2003). Once reunified, they often miss those who have cared for them in their parent's absence as well as extended family members and friends (Arnold, 1991; Sciarra, 1999). Particularly when separations have been protracted, children and parents frequently report that they feel like strangers (Artico, 2003; Forman, 1993). Attachment difficulties have been noted (Wilkes, 1992), and children and youth are often withdrawn from the parents with whom they are reunited (Burke, 1980; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2002) and report low self-esteem at the time of reunion (Smith et al., 2004). Depressive responses have been noted in both children (Rutter, 1971) and mothers (Bernhard et al., 2006; Hohn, 1996). Children may have difficulty trusting others (Arnold, 2006; Artico, 2003), and those who experienced long-term separations are more likely to receive psychiatric services (Morgan et al., 2007). Some youth may respond by externalizing, increased anger, and aggression (Burke, 1980; Dreby, 2007; Lashley, 2000; Smith, 2006; Wilkes, 1992). Thus, previous research from sociological, clinical, and the limited developmental perspectives suggests that while children and youth may be the "primary [intended] beneficiaries of their parents' sacrifice ... [they] are often the last link to move abroad ... [and] are left behind [to] pay the emotional price of separation from parents over the long run" (Dreby, 2007, p. 1051).

### *Overview of the Current Study*

In this article, we provide an indication of the scope of the family separations issue, reporting on the prevalence and nature of these separations among a cohort of newcomer immigrants recruited from a nonclinical setting in public schools, thus affording us a view into youth and their families who have not sought treatment and are more typical of the immigrant experience. The aims

of this article are twofold. We report on the prevalence of family separations across the different groups examining from whom they are separated and the lengths of separations. We then examine the relationships between the lengths of these separations and psychological symptoms (anxiety and depression) at two time points—shortly after the migration and 5 years later. Through analyses of qualitative data, we provide retrospective insights into youth's and parents' experiences of family separations and their current reflections about the reunification experience.

## **Method**

This study utilized a subset of data from the Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation Study (LISA), a 5-year longitudinal study that used interdisciplinary and comparative approaches, triangulating data in order to document patterns of adaptation among recently arrived immigrant youth from five sending origins coming to two receiving centers in the United States (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008). Here, we make use both of quantitative data from structured interviews conducted with individual students in the 1st and 5th years of the study as well as qualitative data gathered from youth, their parents, and school personnel in their schools through semistructured interviews.

### *Mixed-Methods Approach*

The LISA study involved students from distinct languages and cultural backgrounds. Cross-cultural research with immigrants challenges traditional social science assumptions around validity and reliability (McLoyd & Steinberg, 1998). Questions and prompts that are valid for one group may neither be valid nor culturally and linguistically unbiased for another group. Thus, we sought to apply quantitative and qualitative methods complementarily in efforts to triangulate our findings. Convergence emerging from this mixed-methods approach was likely to strengthen the validity of our findings (Bryman, 2004). Furthermore, using mixed methods allowed us to test and validate relationships between variables through quantitative analyses, while gaining an understanding of processes and contextualizing findings from insiders' perspective.

Our mixed methods included structured individual interviews collected over the course of 5 years from students, parents, and school personnel. We sought to develop interviews that were relevant and equivalent across groups. As such, scale development was informed by bilingual/bicultural, "insider"



research assistants in our protocol development team, their ethnographic fieldwork, and grounded emerging findings, thus building upon our mixed-methods synergetic foundations (Day, Sammons, & Gu, 2007). Structured interviews were translated into Spanish, Haitian Creole, Mandarin, and Cantonese by bilingual research teams. The teams, which included members from each of the immigrant groups participating in the study, discussed each item of every scale to be included in the protocol. Wording was tweaked until there was agreement that the items were meaningful and appropriate. After translation, all scales were piloted with five adolescents from each group under consideration and then reviewed in the development team and modified as deemed appropriate.

### *Participants*

Students in the study were recruited from more than 50 schools in the Boston and San Francisco metropolitan areas densely populated by immigrants. The schools were located across seven school districts representing typical contexts of reception for newcomer students from each of the groups of origin (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). By the last year of the study, 74% of our students were attending high school. The majority of participants (65%) attended large schools with more than 1,000 students, and 22% attended a school with between 500 and 1,000 students. Most of our students' schools were also racially and economically segregated. Their schools were characterized by high percentages of students living in poverty, with an average of 48.5% ( $SD = 23.6\%$ ) of students receiving free or reduced-cost lunch. The minority representation rate at the schools our students attended was, on average, 78.0% ( $SD = 23.7\%$ ; see Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008 for detailed description of school contexts).

A diverse sample ( $N = 407$ ; 53% female) of recently arrived immigrant students from Central America, China, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Mexico was initially recruited. Participants ranged in age from 9 to 14 at the beginning of the study ( $M = 11.7$  years of age), though Haitians were on average a year younger than Dominicans and Chinese. All participants had been in the United States no more than a third of their lives ( $M = 1.93$  years). By Year 5, the final sample included 309 students (Chinese = 72; Dominican = 60; Central American = 57; Haitian = 50; Mexican = 70) representing an attrition rate of 5% annually. In this article, we report on the 282 students for whom we had available the anxiety and depression outcome data for both Years 1 and 5. Preliminary analyses of the data for the final year sample of students ( $N = 309$ ) demonstrated that 92 students (29.8%) had missing data;

we performed missing values analysis to assess whether patterns existed in the missing data. Comparisons between the LISA final sample of 309 and the sample of 282 students used in this study revealed no significant differences on any of the variables used in the study.

Participants lived in complex family constellations. On average, students' mothers or maternal figures had received 9.2 years of schooling ( $SD = 4.53$  years), ranging from 0 to 21 years of formal education. One third of the mothers had completed at least a high school education. In general, Dominican mothers reported the most years of schooling; Central American mothers reported the fewest (see Table 1). These ranges in years of education are consistent with national norms for immigrants (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). During the 1st year of the study, 96% of the total sample's fathers were working. By the 5th year of this study, only 66% of the fathers were employed, perhaps reflecting the economic downturn following the attacks of 9/11. Central American fathers were the most likely to be unemployed in the 1st year of the study (11%), while by the 5th year, Dominican fathers became the most likely to be unemployed (58%).

## **Procedures**

We negotiated entrance into school sites with high densities of immigrant students and enlisted the help of school authorities in the recruitment process. With their help, we obtained access to students, teachers, staff, and school records and identified youth who met the inclusion criteria: both parents must have been from one of the five regions of origin and students must have spent at least two thirds of their lives in the country of origin prior to arriving in the U.S. Bilingual and bicultural research assistants, largely from the participants' countries of origin, described the project to potential participants and requested their involvement. The youth took home permission slips for parental signature, and parents were sent a letter (in their language of origin), requesting their informed consent. In many cases, the research assistants followed up with phone calls to the students' homes. The students and parents were told that this was a 5-year project investigating the experience of immigration and were assured that their confidentiality would be maintained.

Each year, students completed interviews either during or after school, depending upon the participant's availability and the activities occurring at school on the day of the interview. Bilingual RAs orally administered all interviews on an individual basis. The student interviews took from 1.5 to 2 hours to administer and involved a variety of question formats (open-ended,

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables by Country of Origin (Final LISA Sample)

|                                        | Total sample,<br>N = 309 | Central<br>America,<br>n = 57 | China,<br>n = 72 | Dominican<br>Republic,<br>n = 60 | Haiti,<br>n = 50 | Mexico,<br>n = 70 |
|----------------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------|----------------------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Gender<br>(percent female)             | 57.09%                   | 60.00%                        | 63.24%           | 62.96%                           | 52.17%           | 46.87%            |
| High school<br>graduate mother         | 33.09%                   | 20.41%                        | 51.56%           | 48.08%                           | 7.50%            | 28.13%            |
| Working parent                         | 66.04%                   | 71.43%                        | 84.38%           | 39.62%                           | 68.42%           | 64.06%            |
| School segregation<br>rate             | 78.03<br>(23.64)         | 83.48<br>(17.68)              | 57.90<br>(29.63) | 90.96<br>(7.45)                  | 73.84<br>(18.10) | 87.49<br>(17.95)  |
| Separation from<br>mother              | 53.96%                   | 80.00%                        | 25.00%           | 71.15%                           | 70.45%           | 39.06%            |
| Separation from<br>father              | 81.29%                   | 100.00%                       | 52.94%           | 92.31%                           | 90.91%           | 49.18%            |
| Length of<br>separation from<br>mother | 1.20 (1.28)              | 1.94 (1.19)                   | 1.06 (1.18)      | 1.67 (1.20)                      | 1.81 (1.44)      | 0.64 (0.93)       |
| Length of<br>separation from<br>father | 1.87 (1.10)              | 2.34 (0.56)                   | 1.06 (1.18)      | 2.37 (0.89)                      | 2.02 (0.90)      | 1.84 (1.16)       |

Note: For categorical variables, we report percentage. Length of separation variables are coded as follows: 0 = no separation, 1 = less than 2 years, 2 = 2 to 4 years, 3 = 4 years or longer.

fill-in-the-blank, Likert-type scales, etc.). The scales were administered in the participants' preferred language so as not to jeopardize the validity of responses given by students with limited literacy skills. Parent interviews were conducted in their native language the 1st and last years of the study at the participants' homes. Teachers were interviewed during the course of the ethnographic work.

The structured interviews were developed to systematically gather data on a variety of relevant topics including migration and demographic history, schooling in the country of origin, initial impressions of U.S. society in general and U.S. schools in particular, aspirations, attitudes toward schooling, patterns of cognitive and behavioral academic engagement, kinship, family life, and networks of social relationships. Due to the length of the interview and the varying circumstances shaping the patterns of adaptation among newcomer immigrant youth, not all measures were administered each and every year of the study. Some measures were replaced by others to minimize the burden on our participants.

While a major function of the structured interviews was to collect the data for the quantitative analyses, several open-ended questions in these interviews administered to the initial sample of 407 informants and their parents provided data for qualitative analyses. In addition, 12 children who had undergone lengthy separations were selected for in-depth interviews focused on their experiences of separations and reunifications; students were selected to represent a range of types of separations, countries of origin, student genders, and patterns of separation (e.g., father only; mother only; both).

### Quantitative Measures

*Patterns of separation.* In the 1st year, parents were asked a series of questions about initial patterns of migration and the length of separations between children and parents. Variables were created to indicate whether or not a child was separated from a parental figure, the lengths of separation from each parental figure, and the length of separation from both parents combined (Cohen's  $\kappa = .90$ ). Descriptive statistics were calculated to determine group differences in patterns and lengths of separations.

*Separations from parents and lengths of separations.* Which parent the participants were separated from and the lengths of separations were examined in psychological symptoms analyses. We examined the length of separation from each of the parental figures (Length of Separation From Mother, Length of Separation From Father), where lengths were categorized as follows: 0 = *no separation*, 1 = *less than 2 years*, 2 = *2 to 4 years*, and 3 = *4 years or longer*. To assess the effect of experiencing separation from both parents, the variable Length of Separation From Both Parents was created by calculating the sum of the two variables indicating the length of separation from each parent and subsequently categorizing the lengths into four groups. Zero was assigned to students who experienced no separation from either parent; 1 (*short-term separation*) was assigned to students whose sum of Length of Separation From Mother and Length of Separation From Father was 1 or 2; 2 (*medium-term separation*) indicated students for whom the sum of the two length variables was 3 or 4; and 3 (*long-term separation*) referred to students whose sum score of the two length variables was 5 or 6.

*Psychological symptoms.* Our outcome measure for the general linear model (GLM) analysis was a 26-item Psychological Symptom Scale, informed by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th ed. [DSM-IV]; American Psychiatric Association [APA], 1994) and the SCL-90

Questionnaire (Derogatis, 1977) developed by our cross-cultural and interdisciplinary research team. The scale consists of five subscales: Depression, Anxiety, Cognitive Functioning, Interpersonal Sensitivity, and Hostility. The questions were designed to be developmentally appropriate and cross-culturally relevant and piloted on informants at the same developmental level as our participants, representing each of the country of origin groups under consideration. We administered this measure in Years 1 and 5 (mean Cronbach's  $\alpha = .86$ ). In our GLMs in which psychological symptoms are outcomes and lengths of separations are predictors, we used two subscales that theoretically are related to loss and that prior analyses had demonstrated were significantly related to academic outcomes (the LISA study's primary focus): Depression (Lately do you: not have much energy, not feel like eating, cry easily, feel sad, feel not interested in much of anything, worry too much), and Anxiety (Lately do you: feel nervous, feel something terrible is going to happen, feel like your heart is racing, feel tense, keep remembering something frightening). Scores ranged from 1 to 4 on each item, with higher scores signifying higher levels of psychological symptoms.

*Socioeconomic factors.* Data on demographic characteristics were derived from parent interviews. Mothers or maternal figures were more likely to be interviewed than fathers. Since the mother's and father's education levels were highly correlated, and there is evidence that mother's education is the best predictor of child outcomes (O'Connor & McCartney, 2007), we focused on mothers' level of education data to gauge participants' socioeconomic status. We determined whether a student had a high school graduate mother (1) or not (0). Parental Employment was used as another socioeconomic factor in the analysis and indicated whether at least one parent in the family was active in the workforce (1) or not (0).

### *Qualitative Data Sources*

The qualitative data presented here were gathered from several sources: (a) open-ended questions from the structured interviews conducted with the whole sample of the 407 informants originally recruited for the LISA study as well as their parents, (b) follow-up separation focused interviews with 12 students who had undergone protracted separations, and (c) insights offered by school personnel in the course of our data collection in the schools.

*Open-ended questions.* In the 1st year of the study, parents were asked about their relationship with their child, and we found they often revealed information about their family separations and reunifications. Specifically, we asked: "What kind of relationship did you have with your child before you came to

the United States? Has your relationship changed since you came to the United States? In what ways? [If things have changed], what do you think are some of the reasons for these changes?" After analyzing the 1st-year data and realizing that such a large proportion of families had been separated during the course of migration, we added to the 2nd-year student interview several questions about the reunifications process which we asked all students who had been separated. These questions included, "How did you feel when you were first reunited? Was there anything difficult or complicated about getting together? And how are things now?"

*Follow-up separations interviews.* During the 2nd year of the LISA project, we selected 12 children who had undergone lengthy separations to participate in extended semistructured 1.5- to 2-hour-long interviews focused on their experiences of separations and reunifications. These participants were selected to represent a range in types of separations, countries of origin, student genders, and patterns of separation (e.g., father only, mother only, both, as well as varying lengths of separation). The interview explored the participants' experiences both during the separations phase as well as during the reunifications phase.

*School personnel insights.* Last, we spent extensive time in schools over the course of our 5-year study and spoke to many teachers and administrators who knew we were studying immigrant student adaptation. Though we did not systematically interview school personnel about family separations, several spontaneously offered their thoughts about this issue as a problem they found that many immigrant students face.

*Coding of all qualitative data.* An open-coding process using phrases as the units of analysis was employed (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). During the first stage of the coding, emergent descriptive themes from all of the transcripts were identified. The initial set of independently identified themes was compared and integrated into a comprehensive list of coding categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Once these "pattern codes" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 67) were identified, a second iteration of coding was conducted using another analytic procedure. First, we cross-referenced based on the kind of separations (mother only, father only, and both) and then by length of separations (short term, medium term, and long term). Examination of the pattern codes and the types of separations revealed insights into the processes and meanings of the separations and reunifications for youth and their families.

The coders (who were not involved in the data collection process to guard against bias during the analytic and interpretative processes) refined the coding scheme "by discussing the meanings of, and relationships between, each coding category, and identified rules for determining when a particular coding category should be assigned to a response" (Mattis et al., 2008, pp. 420-421). Two coders

**Table 2.** Patterns of Family Separations by Country of Origin

|                                           | Chinese,<br><i>n</i> = 68 (%) | Dominican,<br><i>n</i> = 54 (%) | Central<br>American,<br><i>n</i> = 50 (%) | Haitian,<br><i>n</i> = 46 (%) | Mexican,<br><i>n</i> = 64 (%) | Total<br>sample,<br><i>n</i> = 282<br>(%) |
|-------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| Family comes<br>all together              | 48 (33 of 68)                 | 23 (12 of 54)                   | 12 (6 of 50)                              | 15 (5 of 46)                  | 28 (18 of 64)                 | 26                                        |
| Family<br>separated during<br>immigration | 52 (35 of 68)                 | 77 (42 of 54)                   | 88 (44 of 50)                             | 85 (41 of 46)                 | 72 (46 of 64)                 | 74                                        |
| Mother only                               | 18 (12 of 68)                 | 40 (21 of 54)                   | 26 (13 of 50)                             | 26 (12 of 46)                 | 25 (16 of 64)                 | 26                                        |
| Father only                               | 27 (18 of 68)                 | 7 (3 of 54)                     | 8 (4 of 50)                               | 22 (10 of 46)                 | 33 (21 of 64)                 | 20                                        |
| Both parents                              | 7 (5 of 68)                   | 30 (16 of 54)                   | 54 (27 of 50)                             | 35 (16 of 46)                 | 14 (9 of 64)                  | 26                                        |

assessed the reliability of the coding scheme using 10% of randomly selected narrative samples from the data. The formula for interrater reliability was

$$\text{Interrater reliability} = \text{agreement} / (\text{agreement} + \text{disagreement})$$

with a target rate of 85% reliability as the lowest acceptable level for each category (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The software program ATLAS/ti was used to facilitate the inductive and deductive development and application of codes across data sources, as well as the creation of conceptual models.

## Quantitative Results

### *Prevalence and Patterns of Separations*

Nearly three quarters of the participants were separated from one or both of their parents during the migration process. Significant differences between ethnic groups were observed in regards to family separation: Chinese families were least likely to be separated over the course of migration (52%) while the vast majority of Central American (88%) and Haitian children (85%) were separated from either or both of their parents during the course of migration. Approximately, 26% of children in the sample were separated from both parents, a pattern most often occurring in Central American families (54%). In cases where the child was separated from only one parent, about 26% of children were separated from the mother while about 20% of children were separated from the father. Separations from mothers occurred most frequently among Dominican (40%) families, and separations from fathers were most frequently found among Mexican (33%) families (see Table 2 for details).

The length of separation from parents could turn out to be unexpectedly long, with individual cases in our sample reporting being separated from one

**Table 3.** Length of Separation From Mother by Country of Origin

|                   | Central American, n = 50 (%) | Chinese, n = 68 (%) | Dominican, n = 54 (%) | Haitian, n = 46 (%) | Mexican, n = 64 (%) | Total sample, n = 282 (%) |
|-------------------|------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------------|
| No separation     | 20 (10 of 50)                | 75 (51 of 68)       | 24 (13 of 54)         | 33 (15 of 46)       | 60 (38 of 64)       | 45 (127 of 282)           |
| Less than 2 years | 10 (5 of 50)                 | 9 (6 of 68)         | 17 (9 of 54)          | 4 (2 of 46)         | 25 (16 of 64)       | 13 (38 of 282)            |
| 2 to 4 years      | 22 (11 of 50)                | 9 (6 of 68)         | 22 (12 of 54)         | 2 (1 of 46)         | 8 (5 of 64)         | 12 (35 of 282)            |
| 4 or more years   | 44 (22 of 50)                | 7 (5 of 68)         | 33 (18 of 54)         | 52 (24 of 46)       | 8 (5 of 64)         | 26 (74 of 282)            |
| Missing           | 4 (2 of 50)                  | 0 (0 of 68)         | 4 (2 of 54)           | 9 (4 of 46)         | 0 (0 of 64)         | 3 (8 of 282)              |

or both parents for nearly their entire childhood. The length of separation between parents and their children varied widely across regions of origin.

Of the participants who were separated only from their mothers, 54% of Central American children endured separations lasting over 4 or more years, as did approximately a third of both the Dominican and Haitian families. Chinese and Mexican children underwent fewer and shorter separations from their mothers (see Table 3).

When separations from the fathers occurred during migration, they were often very lengthy or permanent ones (see Table 4). For those families who were separated, 28% had separations from fathers that lasted more than 4 years. This was the case for 44% of the Haitian, 42% of Central American, and 28% of the Dominican families.

### *Psychological Ramifications of Separations*

We used multivariate GLMs, with the lengths of separations variables as predictors and psychological symptom scales in Year 1 and Year 5 as outcomes. Table 5 displays the mean levels of psychological symptoms by lengths of separation from mother, from father, and from both parents.

*Year 1.* Analyses of *Length of Separation from Mother* revealed that children who were separated from their mothers for 4 years or longer endorsed significantly higher levels of depression and anxiety symptoms in Year 1 than those who experienced no separation from their mothers,  $F(3, 267) = 3.40$ ,  $p < .05$ . Analyses of *Length of Separation From Father* showed that children who experienced no separation or short-term separation from their fathers reported significantly lower levels of depression and anxiety symptoms in Year 1 than those who experienced medium-term or long-term separations



**Table 4.** Length of Separation From Father by Country of Origin

|                   | Central American, <i>n</i> = 50 (%) | Chinese, <i>n</i> = 68 (%) | Dominican, <i>n</i> = 54 (%) | Haitian, <i>n</i> = 46 (%) | Mexican, <i>n</i> = 64 (%) | Total sample, <i>N</i> = 282 (%) |
|-------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| No separation     | 0 (0 of 50)                         | 47 (32 of 68)              | 7 (4 of 54)                  | 9 (4 of 46)                | 19 (12 of 64)              | 18 (53 of 282)                   |
| Less than 2 years | 4 (2 of 50)                         | 19 (13 of 68)              | 4 (2 of 54)                  | 11 (5 of 46)               | 19 (12 of 64)              | 12 (34 of 282)                   |
| 2 to 4 years      | 58 (29 of 50)                       | 15 (10 of 68)              | 32 (17 of 54)                | 46 (21 of 46)              | 22 (14 of 64)              | 32 (91 of 282)                   |
| 4 or more years   | 38 (19 of 50)                       | 19 (13 of 68)              | 54 (29 of 54)                | 30 (14 of 46)              | 41 (26 of 64)              | 36 (101 of 282)                  |
| Missing           | 0 (0 of 50)                         | 0 (0 of 68)                | 4 (2 of 54)                  | 4 (2 of 46)                | 0 (0 of 64)                | 1 (4 of 282)                     |

$F(3, 271) = 6.04, p < .01$ . Models examining Length of Separation From Both Parents revealed that children who experienced medium- or long-term separations reported significantly higher levels of depression symptoms initially than students who experienced no separation or short-term separations,  $F(3, 271) = 5.66, p < .01$ . Furthermore, students who endured long-term separations from both parents experienced significantly higher levels of combined depression and anxiety symptoms in Year 1 than their peers who had underwent short- or medium-term separations from both parents,  $F(3, 271) = 3.44, p < .05$ .

Comparisons of within country of origin groups did not reveal any significant differences, with one meaningful exception. Mexican students who experienced long-term separations from mothers were significantly more likely than their coethnic peers (who experienced no, short-term, or medium-term separations) to report higher levels of initial combined depressive and anxiety symptoms,  $F(3, 60) = 8.61, p < .001$ , as well as higher levels of depression,  $F(3, 60) = 9.98, p < .001$ , and anxiety,  $F(3, 60) = 4.79, p < .01$ .

*Year 5.* We also examined how the lengths of separation from parents shaped youth's psychological symptoms in the final year of the study. Analyses of Length of Separation From Mother, Length of Separation From Father, and Length of Separation From Both Parents revealed no significant effects on psychological symptoms, suggesting that youth's initial psychological symptoms abated over time. Comparisons within country of origin groups in the final year of the study showed no significant differences in levels of psychological symptoms.

**Table 5.** Mean Levels of Psychological Symptoms in Year 1 and in Year 5 by Length of Separation From Mother, Length of Separation From Father, and Length of Separation From Both Parents

| Psychological symptoms, <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )           | Year 1 depression + Year 1 anxiety | Year 1 depression | Year 1 anxiety | Year 5 depression + Year 5 anxiety | Year 5 depression | Year 5 anxiety |
|----------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------|----------------|------------------------------------|-------------------|----------------|
| Length of separation from mother                         |                                    |                   |                |                                    |                   |                |
| No separation ( <i>n</i> = 126)                          | 1.26 (0.71)                        | 0.62 (0.38)       | 0.64 (0.45)    | 1.15 (0.74)                        | 0.63 (0.42)       | 0.53 (0.44)    |
| Short-term separation (less than 2 years; <i>n</i> = 38) | 1.45 (0.64)                        | 0.79 (0.44)       | 0.66 (0.36)    | 1.24 (0.79)                        | 0.66 (0.46)       | 0.58 (0.44)    |
| Medium-term separation (2 to 4 years; <i>n</i> = 35)     | 1.29 (0.66)                        | 0.68 (0.45)       | 0.62 (0.36)    | 1.42 (1.03)                        | 0.72 (0.50)       | 0.70 (0.63)    |
| Long-term separation (4 or more years; <i>n</i> = 72)    | 1.53 (0.80)                        | 0.80 (0.39)       | 0.80 (0.41)    | 1.40 (0.82)                        | 0.70 (0.42)       | 0.69 (0.50)    |
| Length of separation from father                         |                                    |                   |                |                                    |                   |                |
| No separation ( <i>n</i> = 52)                           | 1.13 (0.56)                        | 0.56 (0.35)       | 0.58 (0.37)    | 1.03 (0.72)                        | 0.58 (0.46)       | 0.46 (0.37)    |
| Short-term separation (less than 2 years; <i>n</i> = 34) | 1.07 (0.62)                        | 0.46 (0.35)       | 0.59 (0.41)    | 1.13 (0.71)                        | 0.58 (0.36)       | 0.55 (0.48)    |
| Medium-term separation (2 to 4 years; <i>n</i> = 91)     | 1.45 (0.76)                        | 0.77 (0.41)       | 0.68 (0.47)    | 1.30 (0.85)                        | 0.68 (0.43)       | 0.62 (0.54)    |
| Long-term separation (4 or more years; <i>n</i> = 101)   | 1.54 (0.77)                        | 0.79 (0.43)       | 0.74 (0.49)    | 1.40 (0.83)                        | 0.72 (0.44)       | 0.68 (0.48)    |
| Length of separation from both parents                   |                                    |                   |                |                                    |                   |                |
| No separation ( <i>n</i> = 41)                           | 1.22 (0.59)                        | 0.56 (0.33)       | 0.56 (0.38)    | 1.04 (0.77)                        | 0.59 (0.49)       | 0.46 (0.40)    |
| Short-term separation (less than 2 years; <i>n</i> = 64) | 1.23 (0.74)                        | 0.56 (0.39)       | 0.66 (0.44)    | 1.10 (0.65)                        | 0.60 (0.34)       | 0.49 (0.45)    |
| Medium-term separation (2 to 4 years; <i>n</i> = 89)     | 1.45 (0.68)                        | 0.79 (0.43)       | 0.67 (0.43)    | 1.45 (0.68)                        | 0.71 (0.46)       | 0.68 (0.48)    |
| Long-term separation (4 or more years; <i>n</i> = 80)    | 1.49 (0.80)                        | 0.77 (0.41)       | 0.72 (0.49)    | 1.38 (0.94)                        | 0.71 (0.45)       | 0.67 (0.53)    |

## Qualitative Insights Into Family Separations and Reunifications

The challenges of family separations emerged throughout our qualitative interviews whether from the perspectives of school personnel, immigrant youth, or their parents.

## *The Perspective of School Personnel*

During the course of our fieldwork, the issue of family separations and the subsequent reunifications was insightfully brought up as a challenge faced by immigrant students by a number of school personnel. Spontaneously, a high school counselor told us,

[In many cases] the family has been separated for many years ... so when they are reunited sometimes it's a mess in the literal sense of the word. The mother doesn't know the child ... Because she knows she's been working, sending money, caring for the child' and everything—she's been doing her part. But now it is the child's turn, you know, to show understanding, to show appreciation ... Sometimes the mother is in a new relationship. So that kids may be coming to a new family with other siblings and a step-parent.

The director of a high school international center talked about his concerns and summed up the challenge:

I feel like I need to give [students] a great deal of personal and emotional support in the transition they are making.... You know, the whole issue of family separations. There are a lot of emotional issues, which come into this ... We have people here from China, from Brazil, from Haiti, from Central America and what is interesting is that they are all [talk about] the same issues. "I don't know how to live with my parent."

## *The Perspectives of Immigrant Families About the Separations Phase*

During the course of the 5-year LISA study we asked questions about a wide range of topics; none were more difficult to broach than family separations and reunification. Many of our otherwise talkative participants became nearly monosyllabic when we posed questions about this topic. When we asked directly about this topic, most of our participants admitted that their family never discussed the time apart. Indeed, in many immigrant families, silence at home surrounded the years of separation. Below we reveal what we learned about their experiences.<sup>1</sup>

*The pain of separation.* The youth spoke emotionally about separating from their loved ones. In fact, the act of separation was often described as one of the hardest things about coming to the United States. One 14-year-old Dominican girl said, “The day I left my mother I felt like my heart was staying behind. Because she was the only person I trusted—she was my life. I felt as if a light had extinguished. I still have not been able to get used to living without her.” We found that leaving a parent behind in the country of origin was described as a particularly poignant loss for the youth.

Parents also spoke of the angst of separating from their children. In many cases this happened when children were infants and toddlers, a critical period for developing the attachment with the parent. The mother of a 13-year-old Central American boy shared: “It was very hard above all to leave the children when they were so small. I would go into the bathroom of the gas station and milk my breasts that overflowed, crying for my babies. Every time I think of it, it makes me sad.” And while the parents told us that they hoped to reunite quickly with their children, the obstacles of money and documentation led to many protracted family separations. A Salvadoran mother of 3 told us,

I never thought it would be so long. But I had no choice. My husband had been killed and my children had no one else. I had to make the journey to El Norte. I left them with my mother hoping I could send for them in a few months but life here is so expensive. I sent money back every month to take care of them and saved every dollar I could and I spent nothing on myself. My life was better in El Salvador. Here I had no friends. I was always lonely. I missed my children desperately and my family. I worked all the time. But a safe crossing was so expensive for 3 children ...

For parents, separation from their children was often compounded with a host of other challenges associated with their migration. These included barriers due to language and cultural differences, long working hours typically with low wages, displacement from familiar settings, and limited social support system. Lack of documentation and concerns about security exponentially added to the distress stemming from having the family torn apart.

*Maintaining contact from afar.* Parents, particularly mothers, maintained contact with their children through a series of strategies which included regular phone calls, the exchange of letters, critical remittances, the sending of photos and gifts, and occasionally return visits (when finances and documentation status allowed). Each one of these forms of contact played important roles in solidifying the memory of the absent parent over time.

The capacity to send remittances to support the children as well as other family members, though abstract in the child's mind, is the core motivation behind the majority of the parental absences. Few of the children, however, seemed to have a clear sense of why their parents were absent. This 15-year-old Guatemalan girl was an exception: "I remember that my grandparents would tell me that my parents had to go to work so they could send money."

Children did recall the gifts that were sent, sometimes on special occasions in the form of money so they could buy what they liked and often in the form of lovingly selected items sent with visitors. A 12-year-old Mexican girl recounted, "My parents would send dolls, necklaces, clothes, and perfume. Things they thought I would like. Once they sent press-on nails. They would send it with friends or uncles who were visiting our town."

For some, the gifts may have served to salve the absence of the parent. A 12-year-old Mexican boy explained, "They [grandparents] would say to me, 'son, do you miss you mother?' I would say, 'yes' and then go and play. With the video games I would forget everything." At some level the youth seemed to be caught up in the moment and may not have been focused on his mother's absence. The youth may simply have been captivated by videogames, as are many of his peers; the game might also have served as an escape to assuage sadness associated with the mother's absence.

This strategy of staying in touch by sending gifts may have been effective for some families; for many, the only feasible means of maintaining contact may have been through such material gifts. Nevertheless, a few children reported that it was not what they really wanted. For example, 14-year-old Chinese girl said, "Even though he kept giving me new beautiful clothes—so what? I felt that he is my father, he should STAY with me, and see how I grow up," suggesting that no amount of material could replace the value of a parent's presence and active involvement in the child's daily life.

Pictures played a particularly important role in keeping the absent parent alive in the imagination of the children. A 10-year-old Mexican girl confided, "I would think about her ... I used to cry in my room with my mother's picture." While some children had memories of their parents, for others, their parents were little more than imaginary figures. For instance, a 16-year-old Guatemalan girl whose mother left when she was 2 and was not to see her until 8 years later when her asylum papers were finally granted told us, "I would look at the pictures of my mother and I would think that I would like to meet her because I could not remember her ... I would say, 'what a pretty mom—I would like to meet her.'" For a number of participants, the parents in the picture were parents in name only; their children had little or no

remembered firsthand experiences or memories of the parent serving in the role of day-to-day care.

Long-distance communication was difficult to maintain over the course of time especially in long-term separations and for children whose parents left when they were very young; as the children grew up, the parent becomes something of an abstraction. As the mother of a 12-year-old Salvadorian boy explained,

They lived with my mother in El Salvador. I left when they were babies. I spoke to the eldest once a month by phone. As the little one grew, I spoke to him, too. But since he didn't know me, our communication was quite short. I really had to pull the words out of him.

In listening to parents, it was evident that the absent child (or children) remained a daily sustaining and motivating presence in their lives. For children, however, the story was somewhat different. Especially in the cases of long-term absences, for children the story was more one of out of sight, out of mind.

### *The Perspectives of Immigrant Families About the Reunification Phase*

One might expect that the reunification would be joyful. And indeed many children, especially those who had short-term separations or who had been separated only from one parent while living with the other, described the moment of reunification with the modal word of "happy." A 13-year-old Guatemalan girl said that on the day she got together with her mother, "[I was] so happy. It was my dream to be with her. An 11-year-old Mexican boy said, "I was very happy to be with my parents again." Likewise a 14-year-old Dominican girl described her family as they got together as, "We were so happy. We cried, talked a lot and embraced."

*Meeting a stranger.* Yet for many children who had endured protracted separations, the reunification was more complicated. While in almost all cases, the children recalled that their parents, mothers in particular, received them in a highly emotional and tearful welcoming manner, for others, the parent was somewhat of stranger. As a 14-year old Guatemalan girl recalled: "My mother was crying. She hugged me ... and I felt bad. Like neither my sister nor I knew her." Thus, for immigrant children, the reunification meant entering a new life in a new land, often with a new set of adults whom they

would call mother and father, or parents whom they have not seen for a long-time long time.

Feelings of disorientation emerged frequently from the data. As a 13-year-old Haitian girl shared, "I didn't know who I was going to live with or how my life was going to be. I knew of my father but I did not know him." Even under optimal circumstances, migrating to a different country and adopting a new way of life is likely to be disorientating. Yet for many youth in our study, this adaptation process was multiply complicated by the uncertainty about whether they would feel comfortable in their own homes, get along with the people they would be living with, and what their routines in the home would be like. In essence, many of these youth were not only migrating to a new land but also to a new family.

At times, the children reported not recognizing the parent and described difficulties in forging a relationship with a near stranger. A 10-year-old Chinese girl recalls, "The first time I saw my father, I thought he was my uncle ... I was really afraid when I saw my father's face. He looked very strict. I was unhappy. My father was a stranger to me." Similarly, a 13-year-old Guatemalan girl whose father left before her birth and mother left when she was a year old, not reuniting until 9 years later told us,

I felt something very strange and since I didn't know my mother I would see a lot of women [at the airport] and I didn't know who was my mom. And when she came to hug me, I said to her, "Are you my mom?" I didn't hug her very strongly because I didn't know her or anything. I didn't have that much trust or didn't feel that comfortable with her.

Some parents perceived the gap in the trust. The mother of a 14-year-old Honduran boy told us, "It was really hard at the beginning because we had been separated for 5 years. At the beginning, he barely trusted me, but now, little by little ..." Thus, the effects of separation often lingered; the process of mending the relationship was a slow one.

In some cases, the predominant feeling expressed was of simple disorientation that needed time to heal. A 16-year-old Guatemalan girl who had been separated since toddlerhood before reuniting 10 years later told us, "It felt weird calling her mom. I had to call her mom but it felt weird at first. Because I had called my grandparents *mami* (mommy) and *papí* (daddy) for everything." For other adolescents, the extended absence led to a sustained rejection of the parent whom they perceived had abandoned them. In such cases, the damage of the long absence led to rifts that seemed challenging to

traverse. A 14-year-old Chinese girl confided that after a 9-year absence: "Suddenly I had another creature in my life called 'father' ... I was too old by then and I could no longer accept him into my life." For some youth, by the time parents reentered their life it was too late. These youth had grown accustomed to living without the missing parent; they were ready to assert greater independence and were unwilling to submit to the parents' authority after an extended absence.

*Coming to terms with new family members.* Parents and adolescents both reported that reunifications could be complicated when the youth had to adapt to an entirely new family constellation. Discomfort with living with new step-parents (or partners) or new siblings (or step-siblings) was frequently noted by both participants and their parents. For example, this 12-year-old Mexican girl admitted that she had not wanted to migrate because "I did not know anybody and I was going to live with a man [a new step-father] I did not like." And a 10-year-old Chinese girl confided that she had not "expect[ed] to live with a stepmother." Outright jealousy was also noted at times. The mother of a 13-year-old Nicaraguan boy disclosed,

We are getting used to each other. We are both beginning a different life together ... [T]he kids are jealous of each other and my husband is jealous of them ... Jealousy exists between those who were born here and those who were not. My son says: "You already spent a lot of time with her [his younger sister born in the United States]."

This family, like many others in our study, had to negotiate multiple new relationships. The mother needed to build her relationship not only with each of her children, but also maintain a healthy marriage. Furthermore, she was positioned to mediate her children's relationship with each other and the relationship between the children and her spouse. It was not unusual for the youth to particularly envy attention lavished on new siblings (or step-siblings), which they had not received in their parent(s)' absence. As a 14-year-old Chinese girl articulately stated, "Now whenever I see how my father spends time playing with my younger sister, I always get mad that he never gave me fatherly love. Now I think he is trying to make up to my younger sister." Envy often led to tension and conflict between family members.

*Missing caretakers in the homeland.* While reunification was often described as a happy event, it was often interlaced with contradictory emotions. The grief of loss is often reexperienced again upon reunification, when the children had to leave the caretaker (frequently a grandparent or aunts and uncles)



who became the symbolic parent during the absence of the parent. A 16-year-old Guatemalan girl explained,

I loved living with them [grandparents] because they were really sweet people. They were wonderful parents. For me they are not like grandparents, they are like my parents because they understand me, [and] they love me ... I did not want to leave them. We were used to living with them.

Understandably, for many students in the study, the caretakers with whom they had daily physical contact had assumed an important role in their lives. An 11-year-old Salvadorian girl said, "I left my aunt and uncle. I felt like they were my parents because they took care of me for 8 years." This meant that for the migrating child, there was a bittersweet feeling upon reunification. A 16-year-old Guatemalan girl told us, "I was sad because I had left my grandparents behind but happy to be together with my mother and all." Similarly, an 11-year-old Central American boy told us, "I was crying because I was leaving my grandfather. I had conflicting feelings. On the one hand I wanted to see my mother, but on the other I did not want to leave my grandfather." Such separations and connections to caretakers were major disruptions to which students had to adapt.

Most of the participants expressed sadness and resignation about the loss of their caretaker in the country of origin though on occasion, anger was the prevailing emotion. A 14-year-old Chinese girl told us, "I felt like they tried to rob me away from my grandmother. I felt like my father was the one who took me away from [her] ... I always blame him for separating me and my grandmother." A mother of a 9-year-old Mexican girl expressed the dilemma of missing parental figures succinctly: "Before she came, she missed us. Now she misses her grandparents." In these families, the grandparents also endured two major separations. The elderly had said good-byes to their own children when the family migration to the United States began, and for a second time, they had to bid farewell to their grandchildren whom they had raised as their own children.

*(Re)Establishing authority.* Parents often expressed tremendous guilt for being away from their children while recognizing that their sacrifice was necessary for the good of the family. At the same time, it often dawned on them that their children did not always understand this. The longer the parents and child were apart, the harder it was for the child to make sense of the situation. Basic issues like parental authority and credibility were undermined the longer the parent and the child were apart. An insightful mother of a 13-year-old Central American girl admitted,

Our relationship has not been that good. We were apart for eleven years and communicated by letters. We are now having to deal with that separation. It's been difficult for her and for me. It's different for my son because I've been with him since he was born. If I scold him he understands where I'm coming from. He does not get angry or hurt because I discipline him but if I discipline [my daughter] she takes a completely different attitude than he. I think this is a normal way to feel based on the circumstances.

Children in such families likely perceived that their parents treated new siblings differently. This perception led not only to tensions between parent and child, but also to reported conflict between siblings and behavioral or emotional difficulties.

*Was it worth it?* We asked participants whether there was anything they would have liked to be done differently or if they thought it would have been better if their parents had stayed in their country of origin. The responses to these questions were revealing. Most indicated that they thought that their parents had made the right decision to migrate. As a 16-year-old Guatemalan girl acknowledged, "If they had not left, we would be living like a lot of people over there who don't have any money."

Nonetheless, nearly all the youth regretted the actual separation: A 12-year-old Haitian boy wished, "for the whole family to be together, [and that] we never separate again." And a 16-year-old Guatemalan girl told us that, "I would have liked for all of us to have come together here with my grandparents and not suffered as we did when we were apart."

*Resilience in the face of the pain of separations and reunifications.* Clearly, the migratory journey lead parents to make sacrifices to provide for their families; in the process, many were away for large portions of their children's formative years. For the immigrant parents, the children maintained a very real presence in their daily existences. Parents framed the daily rigors of their lives as a narrative of sacrifice for their children and dreamed of the longed-for-reunification as a way to sustain them through the painful separations. However, for the children who underwent lengthy separations, over time, the absent biological parent(s) began to fade to an abstraction. While parents were often appreciated and loved in their imagination, it was their daily caregivers who were their *de facto* parents. Children missed their parents but most adapted to their caretaking situations especially, if it happened early in their childhood, was over a sustained period of time, and was in a caring environment. In fact, the youth would later report missing their caretakers when they first arrive to their new land.

In the short term, both parents and children reported that the reunification process was often difficult. This was especially true when the separation was a protracted one from both parents or from the mother. In these cases, the youth appeared to have substituted their attachments to their caretakers in the home country and thus sustained the double loss of homeland and parental figure in migrating. Over time, however, most of the participants appeared remarkably resilient. A 14-year-old Nicaraguan boy summed up what seemed to be the experience of many; “The adaptation took a little time but we tried to get along and then little by little we became comfortable with one another.”

## **Discussion**

### *Normative Family Separations as Part of the Migratory Journey*

In this article, we presented evidence that separations between family members are normative processes in the migratory journey. The majority of immigrant children in our sample, arriving from five countries of origin and recruited on two coasts, had been separated from one or both parents. With well over 20% of children in the United States growing up in immigrant homes, the implications for numbers of youth affected by this phenomenon is striking (Hernandez et al., 2007). Of course, transnationally separated families are not unique to the United States—postindustrial nations the world over have experienced large-scale migrations over the last decade (Bernhard et al., 2006; Gratton, 2007; Marks, 2005; UNDP, 2009). Furthermore, broad socioeconomic transformations have stimulated large-scale internal migrations within nations. Countries like China, India, and Turkey among others have seen massive rural to urban migration bringing about similar patterns of displaced and separated families in disparate national settings (International Organization for Migration, 2008). Thus, a substantial number of children are being affected by this phenomenon globally (UNDP, 2009).

### *Short-Term Psychological Implications*

Our data involving newly arrived immigrant adolescents allowed us to look at two points in time (shortly after migration and again 5 years later) to consider two psychological outcomes—*anxiety* and *depression*. When we compared youth who had not undergone family separations to youth whose families had separated, we found that those who arrived as a family unit were less likely to report depressive or anxiety symptoms than children whose

families had separated. Youth who had undergone the longest separations from their mothers reported the highest levels of anxiety and depression. Generally, the highest levels of distress were reported by the youths who underwent medium- and long-term separations.

The lowest rates of psychological distress were found among children who had not been separated from their mothers or who had undergone separations of less than 2 years from their fathers or from both parents. The greatest distress was found among youth who had undergone separations of 4 or more years from their mothers. Many of these children had stayed with their fathers rather than with both grandparents or with aunts and uncles; we learned in our qualitative interviews that these two-caretaker homes often afforded more stable care as well as extended family supports.

When we considered length of separation from both parents, the least distress was expressed with no separation, and the greatest depressive symptoms were found among those who had undergone medium or long-term separations. The pattern demonstrating a decrease in reported psychological symptoms from Year 1 (an average of 2 years after the reunification) and Year 5 (an average of 7 years after the reunification) across the various length of separation groups indicates extraordinary adaptability and resilience of youth. As adaptation theorists suggest (Brickman & Campbell, 1971; Headey & Wearing, 1989; Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2003), though well-being maybe temporarily disturbed by negative life events, individuals tend to return to baseline level of functioning over time. These findings also point to the importance of taking a longitudinal perspective when considering adaptations to adversity (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000).

The qualitative data clarified the poignancy of the process of separations from children's, parents,' as well as teachers' viewpoints. While for most, the losses resulting from separations as well as the turmoil of reunifications did not lead to measurable long-term psychological symptoms, youth nonetheless reported missing their parents as well as their caretakers back home (Charnley, 2000; Totterman, 1989). Clearly, family separation led to at least short-term angst for parents and children alike.

Taken together, the quantitative and the qualitative analyses indicated that over the course of time, if we consider psychological outcomes or the family descriptions of their family relationships, most newcomer immigrant youth appear to adjust to the loss and negative circumstances of separation resulting from migration. Regardless of country of origin or the length of separation, immigrant youth are remarkably resilient in coping through the painful experience of separation and the complications of adjusting to new family constellations. While there were clearly disorientation and distress in the initial years

of separations and reunification, psychological distress declined over the course of years. Both parents and youth described acute discomfort in the initial months and years following reunification, but most demonstrated remarkable strength, determination, resourcefulness, and resilience in dealing with the imposed challenges. This result is consistent with resilience research that suggests many youth and families have noteworthy capacity to overcome negative circumstances in their lives (Masten, 2001). We should note, however, that while the specific psychological symptoms we measured—*anxiety and depression*—subsided over time, it remains an open question what the long-term developmental, psychological, and relational implications might be.

### *Limitations*

The use of longitudinal data afforded a sensitive tool to understanding the effect of family separations on newcomer immigrant students. This sample was not a representative of the entire immigrant population, however. Random sampling was not possible given the specific inclusion criteria of the study, the need for signed permission forms from school personnel and parents, and the required commitment of 5 years of participation. This limits our ability to generalize from this sample to the larger immigrant youth population, though comparisons of our descriptive statistics (parental education, parental employment, etc.) to census data descriptions of each target population's recent immigrants revealed similar profiles (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008).

This study was not designed to be a study of family separations and reunifications. As such, we did not always have available the kinds of data we would have had if it had been specifically designed as a study of separations. Additionally, given the length of interviews, not all measures could be administered each year of the study. Nonetheless, this data set afforded us a glimpse into an intriguing family process affecting many families with insights into multiple countries of origin, examination of psychological outcomes, with the advantage of a longitudinal perspective using both qualitative and qualitative lenses from both children's and parents' points of views.

### *Future Research*

Future research should attempt to establish prevalence rates in other high intensity immigration settings across the globe (especially in large sending and receiving centers) and with other populations of immigrants. This line of

inquiry would best be done involving researchers on both sides of the border. More research will be required to further unpack the short and long-term effects of separations. Multiple outcomes should be considered beyond depression and anxiety, including academic performance, trust, family relationships and conflict, interpersonal relationships, among others, as these outcomes may have been affected by disruptions in family relationships. Studies should be developed to examine what are the particular vulnerable stages of development for separations and subsequent reunifications.

Cross-cultural perspective is critical in understanding these migration-related separations. Theories on parent-child relationship such as attachment theory would predict that family separations lead to negative psychological outcomes. Such frames of reference are limited by the fact that they were developed by Western-trained psychologists with the constricted lens of understanding that comes with that perspective. This leaves us with the question of whether such theories and principles might “apply to *many, most, or all* ... irrespective of their national or cultural contexts and irrespective of income, [and] education” (Arnett, 2008, p. 609). Although the exploration of country of origin differences yielded limited distinctions in responses to parental separations, there was one key exception—while for other groups, the psychological symptom abated over time, the Mexican children reported short-term depression and anxiety as well as residual anxiety that were sustained over time, the longer they were separated from their mothers. This finding suggests the possibility of cultural differences in patterns of normative acceptance of mothers leaving to be explored in further studies.

In order to avoid imposition of ethnocentric outcomes, however, doing initial qualitative work with professionals in country of origin considering outcomes of concern noted within that context would strengthen the constructs and instruments used. Culturally sensitive work should consider cultural norms of child care and the meaning of collective values of family in different cultures that are closely related to family separation issues.<sup>2</sup> We find that child fostering is a normative child care practice in the Caribbean and African cultures. For Chinese immigrants, it is now a common practice to send infants back to China to be raised by grandparents until school age; then they are returned to birth parents to begin their education in Canada or the United States (Bohr et al., 2009; Da, 2003; Gaytán et al., 2006). For some other families, separation could be an intentional strategy to seek greater opportunities for children’s futures as well as to secure and improve the family’s collective position in this globalized economy of 21st century, as we can see in cases of “parachute children” (Orellana et al., 2001).

Future research should take into consideration developmental patterns, as there are likely to be certain stages of development in which children may be more or less vulnerable for separation or reunification. Further qualitative research needs to be conducted to unpack the gendered processes behind the variations and nuanced sensitivities to separations from the mother or the father. Further research should build on previous work that point to an association between complicated family reunifications and subsequent academic difficulties (Gindling & Poggio, 2009; Suárez-Orozco *et al.*, 2008). Evidence-based intervention studies should be developed with the aim of attenuating the effects of separation as well as developing strategies to help families manage the reunification process.

On a cautionary note, there are significant ethical landmines in conducting this kind of research, as participants are often both emotionally vulnerable as they speak of their significant losses as well as legally vulnerable, since many have not achieved full documented status. Thus, researchers must proceed with extreme care as they move forward in conducting research in this important domain affecting many families in our evermore-globalizing world.

In conclusion, it appears that for many immigrant youth, irrespective of culture of origin, separations cause angst that may create at least a temporary challenge to family relationships and development. Many children and families report that the process is difficult and leads to a sense of longing and missing one another. Children and youth articulate missing loved ones—parents (during the separation phase) and caretakers (during the reunification phase). Quite notably, however, transnational youths display remarkable resilience in the face of the adversities of family separation. Moving forward, those serving immigrant communities should keep in mind the magnitude of the phenomenon of immigrant family separations. While recognizing the short-term challenges it presents to families and youth, service providers and researchers must check their cultural biases, assumptions, and expectations of what a “typical” family looks like as well the long-term vicissitudes as immigrant families adapt to change.

### **Authors' Note**

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## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

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## Note

1. All names used throughout the text are pseudonyms.

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## Bios

**Carola Suárez-Orozco** is a professor of applied psychology at Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development as well as codirector of immigration studies at New York University. Her research focuses on immigrant families and youth, academic adaptations of immigrant students, immigrant identity formation, immigrant family separations, and the gendered experiences of immigrant youth.

**Hee Jin Bang** is a postdoctoral fellow/program associate at the William T. Grant Foundation, New York. Her research interests include the role of homework in the academic lives of immigrant youth, second-language acquisition, assessment of English language learners' academic achievement, and the influences of school and family settings on minority youth's civic engagement.

**Ha Yeon Kim** is a PhD student of developmental psychology in Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development at New York University. She has an MA in child development from Seoul National University. Her research interests include the academic adaptation of immigrant children, language development and second-language acquisition, and culturally sensitive classroom interactions.