

“We Are Family” – Family Identity and Obligation across Contexts:

A Comparison of Latino Youth in North Carolina
and Southern California

Andrew Fuligni and Jenjira Yahirun*
PAA Call for Papers Submission
2/15/2010

*Andrew Fuligni is Professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Biobehavioral Sciences and the Department of Psychology at UCLA. Jenjira Yahirun is a graduate student in the Department of Sociology, UCLA. They are both affiliates of the California Center for Population Research at UCLA and the Interdisciplinary Relationship Science Program, where Jenjira is a graduate trainee.

INTRODUCTION

Family obligation plays an important role in the lives of ethnic minority and immigrant youth (Fuligni et al. 1999). Previous research shows that levels of family obligation are higher among adolescents of Asian and Latino backgrounds than their European-American counterparts; and that stronger endorsements of family obligation are also associated with higher levels of academic motivation and actual assistance to the family in the future (Fuligni et al. 1999; Fuligni 2001; Fuligni and Pedersen 2002). This research sheds light on the significance of family obligations for adolescents, yet it is unclear why attitudes towards family obligation differ between groups in the first place.

One explanation for ethnic group differences is the variation in cultural norms governing expectations of family obligation (Phinney et al. 2000). Simply stated, certain ethnic groups may hold cultural values, for example ancestry worship in East Asian families as well as familism among Latin American families that emphasize filial obligation and familial duties. A second explanation for between group differences in levels of family obligation is the relatively poor socioeconomic status of ethnic minority families compared to Whites. Yet previous research shows that even after taking into account parents' socioeconomic status, ethnic minority youth report higher levels of family obligation than their European American counterparts (Fuligni et al. 1999). A third consideration is the effect of social context on attitudes towards family obligation. Ecological perspectives argue that social environments shape a number of socioeconomic, psychological and developmental outcomes among adolescents (Bronfenbrenner 1989; Eccles et al. 1993). However, researchers have generally ignored the potential effects of more distal social factors on family identity, family relationships or family obligation, opting instead to concentrate on how families themselves act as socializing agents for adolescents (Umaña-Taylor 2009).

This project challenges the assumption that family environments and in particular, levels of family obligation, are universal for all ethnic minority groups regardless of geographic location or social environment. The project uses data on Latino youth from two very different social contexts - North Carolina and Southern California - to examine associations between adolescents' distal social environments and youth's reports of family obligation. As a "new destination" for Latino migrants, the social context of reception in North Carolina differs from Southern California, with its historic connection to Mexico and well-established Latino population. In this study, adolescents' distal social environments – the neighborhood and school – are examined. We ask whether ethnic composition at the school and neighborhood level and experiences/anxieties concerning racial and ethnic discrimination in either/both contexts are associated with a heightened family identity. Furthermore, we ask whether adolescent's ethnic identity is the mediating variable through which school and neighborhood characteristics affect family obligation and family identity.

BACKGROUND

Two important frameworks set the stage for this project. First, we draw heavily from Fuligni and Flook's (2005) idea that a social identity framework (Tajfel 1972; Tajfel et al. 1979) can be applied to the family. We argue that understanding family identities is especially important for ethnic minority youth, who may be more likely to identify with the family than their European American counterparts given that ethnic group membership in the United States is derived through family of origin (Fuligni and Flook 2005). Second, we draw on Bronfenbrenner's (1989) ecological theory to examine how factors within an adolescent's

immediate environment affect one another. In particular, we argue that more “distal factors” such as perceived and actual reports of racial/ethnic discrimination received from adults and from peers, as well as neighborhood and school racial/ethnic composition, affect adolescents’ family identities. However, we also argue that the main mechanism linking these distal factors to family identities is the ethnic identities of adolescents themselves.

Two Social Contexts: North Carolina and Southern California

In the United States, comparative research on ethnic minority youth growing up in different social contexts is rare. One reason is the heterogeneity of ethnic minorities residing in different regions across the United States. For example, Chinese American children in New York differ from Mexican American children in Los Angeles in more ways than one. A second reason, however, is that the historic settlement of immigrants and their children in established “gateway” cities along the coasts as well as in the American southwest created an assumption of homogeneity across these regions rooted in their capacity to absorb new arrivals. The recent migration of labor migrants, mostly from Mexico, to the “new destinations” of North Carolina, Kansas and Iowa, among others, questions the assumption that migrants can be easily absorbed. North Carolina in particular has witnessed an exponential growth in the foreign-born and Latino populations. The influx of Latinos into the existing social milieu is particularly profound given North Carolina’s lack of tradition as an immigrant receiving state.

In a recent study that examined differences in Latino youth in North Carolina and Southern California, Perreira, Fuligni and Potochnick (2009) found that despite higher levels of perceived and received discrimination, Latino youth in North Carolina also reported higher levels of academic motivation than their co-ethnic peers in Los Angeles. Significant factors behind the differences in academic motivation include the large proportion of foreign-born adolescents in the North Carolina sample, a greater endorsement of ethnic identification and family identification as well as a more positive view of school environments among adolescents in North Carolina. This study confirms that even though some communities in North Carolina have welcomed new immigrants, perceived and experienced levels of discrimination are higher in the “new” destination location compared to Southern California. Although Perreira and colleagues (2009) found corresponding high levels of family obligation and a stronger sense of ethnic identities in North Carolina, the direct association between neighborhood and school environments and family obligation, as well as the mediating role of ethnic identity, was not examined.

This study asks three basic questions. First, how are differences in adolescents’ social environments in North Carolina and Southern California associated with their endorsements of future family obligation? Second, is the association between social context and family obligation mediated by the strength of adolescents’ ethnic identities? Third, after controlling for individual as well as family-level socioeconomic and demographic characteristics, do differences in reported levels of family endorsements for Latino youth in North Carolina and Southern California remain? If so, what are the various contributions of contextual factors, individual and family-level characteristics to this difference?

METHODS

Sample

To answer these questions, we use data from the Los Angeles Social Identification and Academic Adaptation study (LA-SIAA) and the North Carolina Southern Immigrant Academic

Adaptation study (NC-SIAA). These data present a rare opportunity for cross-regional analysis on Latino youth given that the NC-SIAA survey instruments were based on the original LA-SIAA questionnaires. The combined sample consists of 557 Latino adolescents: 318 from Los Angeles and 239 from North Carolina (Perreira et al. 2009). The LA study specifically sampled youth from three high schools with high proportions of Latino adolescents, although in no school was there a dominant Latino population. This project uses a cross-section of the LA-SIAA data collected in 2002-03, when participants were predominantly enrolled in 9th grade.¹ The NC-SIAA data were collected in 2006-7 and includes a more geographically diverse set of participants. Using a stratified random sample of 9th grade Latino adolescents enrolled throughout the state in high-density Latino communities, the study captures a diverse population including both rural and urban residents (Perreira et al. 2009). Because the samples studied here include Latino (and predominantly Mexican) youth only, differences in ethnic beliefs, traditions or values that may differentiate some ethnic groups from others is arguably taken into consideration (Phinney 1990).

Procedure

The analysis will consist of three parts. First, we will describe and test for mean differences in measures of family obligation, social context, and ethnic identities in North Carolina and Los Angeles. We will next use traditional regression analysis to examine the association between social contexts and adolescents' reports of family obligation. Pooling the two sources of data together, we will first run a baseline model that examines the association between state of residence and reported levels of family obligation. This model will control for parental education and work status, participant's sex, age, nativity and number of siblings. The next model will add in variables describing neighborhood and school-level characteristics, such as the ethnic composition of the school census tract and feelings of perceived and received discrimination in the school and neighborhood. In the third model, we will include participant's own sense of ethnic identity to test whether the association between contextual factors is in fact mediated by adolescents' ethnic identities. The third part of the research plan consists of a decomposition analysis, which quantifies the relative contributions of school and neighborhood environments and demographic traits on differences in endorsements of family obligation across regions.

Measures

Future Family Obligation The dependent variable of interest measures adolescents' feelings of future obligations towards the family. The measure is based on a 5-point, 6-item scale asking students to rate the importance of such statements as "Helping parents financially in the future" or "Living at home with parents until married", etc.

Neighborhood and School Environments The independent variables measuring social contexts are divided into two categories. The first set of variables measures the objective social conditions of the neighborhood surrounding the school based on census data. We use the percent Latino broken into quartiles for school tracts (or blocks) and schools. The second set of measures is taken from the survey instruments directly. They include 1) a series of vignettes about discrimination and 2) adolescents' reports of discrimination from teachers and peers.

¹ The LA-SIAA study is longitudinal, having captured 9th graders in the 2002-03 school year and annually collecting data until 2006-07, when those who had not previously dropped out, graduated from high school. The data used in this project are a cross-section of participants when they are in the 9th grade. This allows comparability with the 9th grade sample from North Carolina.

Ethnic Identity Finally, we ask whether ethnic identities mediate the relationship between social contexts and family identities. The LA-SIAA and NC-SIAA include two measures of ethnic identification. The first measure assesses ethnic affirmation and belonging and is derived from the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure developed by Phinney (1990) (Perreira et al. 2008). It includes questions such as “I am happy that I am a member of the ethnic group I belong to” and “I have a lot of pride in my ethnic group and its accomplishments.” A second measure asks adolescents about the centrality of their ethnic identity. The measure includes questions such as “In general, being a member of an ethnic group is an important reflection of who I am” and “Being part of an ethnic group is not a major factor in my social relationships.”

POTENTIAL RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS

Based on the results from Perreira et al. (2009), we expect that Latino adolescents in North Carolina will perceive and report more discrimination than youth in Los Angeles. For that reason, we also expect that Latino adolescents in North Carolina will have stronger endorsements of ethnic identity than their Angeleno peers, consistent with Fuligni and Flook’s (2005) hypothesis regarding the heightening of ethnicity in situations where group membership is made salient. Finally, we predict that because of the stronger ethnic identities among adolescents in North Carolina, they will also report stronger endorsements of future family obligation. We also expect that once adolescents’ individual and parental characteristics are taken into account, very little cross-regional difference in the levels of family identity and obligation will remain.

Social contexts are often ignored as a possible explanation for ethnic group differences in reports of family obligation. One reason is that too often, social scientists rely on the false dichotomy between economic versus cultural explanations as the culprit behind human social behavior. This study thus adds much needed nuance to the literature on family obligation, caregiving norms and so-called cultural differences among ethnic minority youth and their majority peers by using data from North Carolina and Southern California to investigate how social contexts shape ethnic identities, which in turn influence family identity and obligation. The study controls for potential ethnic group differences (Phinney 1990) by examining Latino adolescents only; it also takes into account socioeconomic conditions by controlling for parents’ education. What is left is a rare comparison of the effects of social contexts on family identity and ethnic identity among Latino youth in the United States.

REFERENCES

- Bronfenbrenner, Urie. 1989. Ecological system theory. In Vasta, R. (ed.) *Six Theories of Child Development: Revised Formulations and Current Issues*. Vol 6. JAI Press, Greenwich, Connecticut.
- Brooks-Gunn, Jeanne, Greg J. Duncan, Pamela Klebanov, and Naomi Sealand. 1993. "Do Neighborhoods Influence Child and Adolescent Development?" *AJS* 99:353-95.
- Eccles, J. S., Midgely, C., Wigfield, A., Buchanan, C., Reuman, D., Flanagan, C., & Mac Iver, D. (1993). Development during adolescence: The impact of stage-environment fit on young adolescents' experiences in school and in families. *American Psychologist*, 48, 90-101.
- Edin, Kathryn and Laura Lein. 1997. *Making Ends Meet: How single mothers survive welfare and low-wage work*. New York: Russell Sage.
- Fuligni, A. J., Tseng, V., & Lam, M. 1999. Attitudes toward family obligations among American adolescents from Asian, Latin American, and European backgrounds. *Child Development*, 70, 1030-1044.
- Fuligni, A. J. 2001. Family obligation and the academic motivation of adolescents from Asian and Latin American, and European backgrounds. In A. Fuligni (Ed.), *Family obligation and assistance during adolescence: Contextual variations and developmental implications*, (New Directions in Child and Adolescent Development Monograph). (pp. 61-76). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc.
- Fuligni, A.J., & Pedersen, S. 2002. Family obligation and the transition to young adulthood. *Developmental Psychology*, 38, 856-868.
- Fuligni, A.J., & Flook, L. 2005. A social identity approach to ethnic differences in family relationships during adolescence. In R. Kail (Ed.), *Advances in Child Development and Behavior* (pp. 125-152). New York: Academic Press.
- García Coll, C.T., Lamberty, G., Jenkins, R., McAdoo, H. P., Crnic, K., Wasik, B. H., & Vazquez García, H. 1996. An integrative model for the study of developmental competencies in minority children. *Child Development*, 67(5), 1891-1914.
- Harding, David J. 2003. "Counterfactual Models of Neighborhood Effects: The Effect of Neighborhood Poverty on High School Dropout and Teenage Pregnancy." *AJS* 109: 676-719.
- Hardway, C., & Fuligni, A.J. 2006. Dimensions of family connectedness among adolescents with Chinese, Mexican, and European backgrounds. *Developmental Psychology*, 42, 1246-1258.
- Hogg, M. A. 2003. Social identity. In M. R. Leary & J. P. Tangney (Eds.), *Handbook of self and identity* (pp. 462-479). New York: Guilford.
- Kling, Jeffrey, Jeffrey Liebman, and Lawrence Katz. 2007. "Experimental Analysis of Neighborhood Effects." *Econometrica* 75: 83-119.

- Lewin, K. 1948. Resolving social conflict. New York: Harper.
- Newman, Katherine. 1999. No Shame in My Game: The Working Poor in the Inner City. New York: Knopf/Russell Sage Foundation.
- Perreira, K., Fuligni, A., Potochnick, S. 2009. "Fitting in: The Roles of Social Acceptance and Discrimination in Shaping the Academic Motivations of Latino Youth in the U.S. Southeast." *Journal of Social Issues*, in press.
- Phinney, J. S. 1990. Ethnic identity in adolescents and adults: Review of research. *Psychological Bulletin*, 108, 499-514.
- Phinney, J., Madden, T., & Ong, A. 2000. "Cultural values and intergenerational value discrepancies in immigrant and non-immigrant families." *Child Development*, 71, 528-539.
- Portes, A. and Ruben Rumbaut. 2001. *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press and Russell Sage Foundation.
- Portes, A. and Min Zhou. 1993. 'The new second generation: Segmented assimilation and its variants among post-1965 immigrant youth', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, vol. 530, pp. 74-96
- Tajfel, H. 1972. Social Categorization. In S. Moscovici (Ed.) *Introduction a la psychologie sociale* (Vo. 1, pp. 272-302). Paris: Larousse.
- Tajfel, H. & Turner, J.C. 1979. An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W.G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 33-47). Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Umaña-Taylor, A., E. Alfaro, M. Bamaca, A. Guimond. 2009, "The Central Role of Familial Ethnic Socialization in Latino Adolescents' Cultural Orientation" *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 71(1): 46-60.
- Waters, M. C. 1999. Black identities: West Indian immigrant dreams and American realities. New York: Russell Sage. Chapter 8, pp. 285-325.