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Emotional Reactions and Coping of Mexican Mixed-Status Immigrant Families in Anticipation of the 2016 Presidential Election

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Abstract

The present study illuminates the emotions of mixed-status families as they anticipated the 2016 Presidential election. From a 6-year longitudinal case study of four Mexican immigrant families, we present interviews from May of 2016, prior to the presidential primaries, and from November of 2016, the day before or the day of the presidential election. Using a multiple case study method (Stake, 2006, Multiple case study analysis. Guilford Press, New York; Yin, 2014, Case study research: Design and methods (5th ed.). Sage, Los Angeles, CA), our primary goal was to describe how immigrant Mexican adults and their preadolescent and adolescent children (or grandchildren) personally and collectively reacted emotionally to the events leading up to the 2016 presidential election, and how they managed and coped with their emotions. Our secondary goal was to explain how their emotional reactions changed over time and were influenced by age and immigration status. Initially, participants expressed concern and fear about the anti-immigration rhetoric by the conservative political movement, but largely felt reassured that such rhetoric would not prevail. In the days immediately preceding the election, a notable change seemed apparent among all participants, regardless of immigration status. They expressed having intense emotions ranging from fear and angst to disbelief, anger, and denial, which they attempted to manage through external (e.g., community involvement, activism, solidarity) and internal (e.g., family communication, cognitive strategies) actions. Older adolescents had a better understanding of the implications of the election for their family than younger adolescents did. We provide recommendations for family practice and policy aimed to support and advocate on behalf of immigrant families.

Keywords

Immigrant; Mexican; Families; Election; Policy; Coping

The United States (U.S.) presidential election of 2016 was the focus of much anticipation and speculation. Although many individuals were immersed in who would win the

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presidency, one can expect that immigrants in the U.S. were especially attuned because of the conservative candidates' proposed policies on immigration. Emerging research shows that anti-immigration rhetoric and policies resulting from the Trump administration contribute to negative psychological consequences in immigrants, such as sadness and worry, sleeping issues, and fear for their families (Barajas-Gonzalez, Ayón, & Torres, 2018; Wray-Lake et al., 2018). The current qualitative study captures the emotions and coping strategies of individuals from mixed-status families of Mexican origin in the months and days leading up to the 2016 presidential election.

Immigration and Political Debate

Despite a decrease in Mexican migration to the U.S. since 2009 (Passel & Cohn, 2016), several 2016 presidential candidates depicted immigration from Mexico as a national crisis associated with rising crime, destabilizing jobs, draining social resources, and violating our borders (Vidal, 2018). These accusations were an attempt to blame immigrants for the slowing economy and threats to national security (Flores, 2015). Anti-immigration rhetoric against immigrants became pervasive over the months leading to the 2016 election (Vidal, 2018). Candidate Trump centered the election on immigration, promising to build a wall along the southern border of the U.S. (Washington Post, 2015), to jeopardize immigrants already in the U.S. by threatening to penalize sanctuary cities (Dove, 2016), and to end existing protections to the Obama-era Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program and birthright citizenship (Ehrenfreund, 2015).

Anti-immigration climate has existed for decades against Mexican immigrants in the U.S. (Sullivan & Enriquez, 2016). At the state level, Arizona passed in 2010 the Support Our Law Enforcement and Save our Neighborhoods Act (SB 1070), which allowed law enforcement officials to question the documentation status of individuals who were suspected of being undocumented. SB1070 was linked to negative health and social consequences in immigrants (e.g., Brabeck, Lykes, & Hunter, 2014; Roche, Vaquera, White, & Rivera, 2018; Valdez, Padilla, & Lewis Valentine, 2013), including a decrease in public assistance and healthcare services among Mexican-origin adolescents and mothers (Toomey et al., 2014; Vargas, 2015). Furthermore, policies such as SB1070 increase fear among Latino and other minority populations because of racial profiling and harassment from authorities within their communities (Toomey et al., 2014).

Immigrants' Lived Experiences of the Sociopolitical Climate

Judgments about the future can stem from the expectations people hold (Irving & Montes, 2009), and depending on the saliency of these expectations, they can have an impact on health (Skov-Ettrup, Egan, Dalum, & Tolstrup, 2017). In the case of immigration enforcement, proximity to someone who has been deported has an effect on the perceived likelihood of being deported, and this perception is associated with an increased risk of mental health problems (Vargas, Juárez, Sanchez, & Livaudais, 2018). Restrictive immigration policies exacerbate social inequities because they limit economic opportunities and social services to immigrant communities (Vargas, 2015). Moreover, anti-immigrant political rhetoric have heightened a form of violence coined "the violence of uncertainty," which negatively affects the mental and physical well-being of immigrants by undermining a sense of security and willingness to seek healthcare and social services (Grace, Bais, & Roth, 2018). Although uncertainty toward the future can negatively affect well-being, studies also link immigrant optimism, self-sacrifice, and activism with emotional well-being (Cardoso & Thompson, 2010; Wray-Lake et al., 2018).

A Framework to Understand the Lived Experiences of Mixed-Status Families

The Multidimensional Ecosystemic Comparative Approach (MECA; Falicov, 2014, 2017) serves as an overarching framework for this study. MECA captures the multilayered experiences and identities of individuals, and is especially relevant for mixed-status families because family members differ based on immigration status and acculturation (Falicov, 2014). MECA emphasizes four core domains: the immigration and acculturation domain (e.g., the immigration status of the participating family members and their experiences in the U.S.), the ecological context domain (e.g., the interactions of participants with others in their community), the family organization domain (e.g., values and beliefs, family conversations, and family arrangements), and the family life cycle domain (e.g., developmental stages, transitions, life events), as well as the intersection of these domains with sociopolitical forces such as the political climate (Falicov, 2014, 2017).

In terms of the first of MECA's domains (Falicov, 2014, 2017), *immigration and acculturation*, place of birth and authorization of U.S. entry shape who enjoys rights to social resources, which may in turn influence a sense of belonging and identity (Falicov, 2017). Yet, emerging research shows that U.S.-born or naturalized citizen children from families in which other family members are unauthorized to reside in the U.S. may not experience the same level of social inclusion as children from nonimmigrant families (Vargas, 2015). For citizen children of mixed-status families, fear of parental deportation and family separation may lead to their avoidance of social services and, in general, of public spaces (Vargas, 2015).

In the second domain, *ecological context*, mixed-status families may be exposed to harassment from strangers and police, which has been found to increase avoidance and stress in this population (Brabeck et al., 2014). Supports from the home environment can also assist youth in making meaning of their emotional experiences, managing their emotions, and planning for the future. Parents may engage youth in advice-giving, instillation of ethnic pride, and regular communication, all believed to be part of the MECA's third domain of *family organization* (Falicov, 2014, 2017). Consistent with the fourth domain, *family life cycle*, the parental strategies mentioned above may differ based on stability of family relationships and caretaker capacities, children's age, and family transitions and events (Falicov, 2014). For example, caretakers concerned about the current political environment may have less capacity to deal with the demands of raising children. Moreover, Philbin and Ayon (2016) found that parents are more likely to have conversations with their older children about discrimination and immigration climate than they are with their younger children. Thus, applying the MECA model presents family practitioners with a cultural and

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contextual picture of risk and resilience in families, and acknowledges cultural diversity and social justice issues in clinical practice (Falicov, 2017).

METHOD

Research Questions and Choice of Inquiry Method

We chose a Multiple Case Study method (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2014) to provide an up-close contextualized description and explanation of the personal and collective experiences of a select group of individuals within mixed-status families. The goal of case studies is to illustrate a nuanced experience that represents not the population, but the case as a whole (Maxwell, 2012). Our primary research question was how immigrant Mexican caretakers in our study and the adolescent children they raise emotionally reacted to and coped with the anticipation of the 2016 presidential election. Our secondary research question was how family members' emotions and coping strategies changed over time as the election drew near, and in the context of the family life cycle (e.g., parent demands, youth age) and immigration status.

Study and Participants

Our research is part of larger mixed-methods studies involving families in Arizona. In one of the larger studies, we conducted three focus groups with 25 Mexican caretakers whose children were enrolled in one of three Title I schools. Focus groups took place 6 months after Arizona passed Senate Bill 1070 in 2010 (Valdez, Lewis Valentine, & Padilla, 2013; Valdez, Padilla, & Lewis Valentine, 2013). In 2014, we contacted six families (two per school) who had participated in the focus groups to participate in the second study, a longitudinal case study of daily life and well-being in the context of immigration policy.

We followed criteria for purposeful selection for case studies to meet our study: (a) Individuals should report experiences with SB1070, including detention and/or deportation of a family member, police encounters, and incidents of harassment, and (b) individuals should exhibit openness to discussing details about their experience. The first selection criterion aims to select participants with experiences that can answer our research questions and build nuanced cases based on meanings, similarities, differences, and changes over time (Maxwell, 2012). The second criterion is consistent with longitudinal case studies, in which establishing and maintaining trust over time is essential (Yin, 2014). Trust could be compromised if participants were not open to discussing their experiences (Yin, 2014). Additionally, a motivation to not recruit families who were less open about their experiences in focus groups was to honor their instinct to protect their family against any repercussions from research in the current climate.

Upon contacting families by phone, one family could no longer be located and a second family from the same school declined to participate because of a family medical matter. The four remaining families represent the sample for the present study, including caretakers ($n = 8$) and youth ($n = 10$). Home visits were scheduled with each family to consent/assent and interview family members.

Family characteristics are presented in Table 1. All caretakers had completed less than a high school education, were born in Mexico, and had unauthorized status, and children were either born in Mexico and had unauthorized status ($n = 3$) or born in the U.S. and had citizenship ($n = 7$). Caretakers were equally sp lit male and female, and 80% of children identified as male. Participants had an average of 2.5 children living in the home. All children met eligibility for free or reduced school lunch. Children were bilingual in English and Spanish, although most preferred English. Caretakers were Spanish dominant. Families reported migrating to the U.S. between 1996 and 2000. The Suárez family had initiated a petition to adjust their citizenship status through a U Visa, after becoming a victim of a carjack attempt 5 years earlier. A second family in our study, the García family, reported an adult son being murdered 10 years prior. This family chose not to apply for a U Visa because caretakers worried that applying while undocumented might place their family in jeopardy for deportation.

Procedures

Our study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at our institution and is protected by a Certificate of Confidentiality from the National Institutes of Health to prevent forced disclosure of participant identities to a governmental agency. We interviewed each child separately in a private space within the home, such as a bedroom, living room, dining room, kitchen, or patio. We interviewed caretakers in similar spaces, away from children, with half of caretakers choosing to be interviewed with their partner and the other half separately. Caretakers and youth read and signed a written consent form and assent form, respectively, which described limits to confidentiality and explained their potential participation. For each interview, we offered a $40 cash incentive to adults and a $20 gift card to youth.

For the present article, we focused on the upcoming presidential election in 2016—the first set of interviews in May, which was 1 month before the presidential primaries and 6 months before the general election, and the second set of interviews in November, conducted 1 day prior and the day of the election, but prior to reporting of results. The two rounds of interviews took place on our fifth and sixth visits to the family since the inception of the larger study, for which 10 visits have been conducted over 6 years.

We developed the interview protocol based on data already collected from participants in earlier rounds of interviews, the literature on anti-immigration climate, and recent events leading to the election. Previous interviews had explored participant perspectives on state and national immigration policies and enforcement, experiences of harassment, discrimination, and fear, strategies to prevent encounters with police or ICE, family dynamics, and implications on youth development. Our final protocol for the May and November 2016 interviews consisted of three open-ended questions and sub-questions about (a) how families were affected emotionally by the upcoming election, (b) how they coped with these emotions, and (c) aspects of the family life cycle and immigration status that shaped their understanding and expression of these issues. In our November interviews, we also asked how participants' emotions and coping strategies changed since the May interviews. We moderated all youth interviews (60 minutes) in English and caretaker interviews (90 minutes) in Spanish. We audiotaped and transcribed the interviews, debriefed, and read field notes we took after each interview.

Analysis and Validity Assessment

We analyzed the data in three phases. First, we read transcripts in their original language, reviewed field notes, and listened to audio-recordings to (re)familiarize ourselves with the interview content, the sequencing of information, and the emphasis behind participants' responses. Second, we independently transformed the transcripts into descriptive statements —verbatim statements of one or more sentences aligned with a particular topic—in order to capture experiences and meanings, and compared coding schemes in order to arrive at consensus on descriptive statements (Wertz, 2005). Third, we grouped and categorized descriptive statements from all transcripts into themes. Consistent with our MECA framework (Falicov, 2014), we looked for how experiences of the election related to immigration, ecological context, family organization, and life cycle factors. We handled disagreements in coding by re-reading the transcript and discussing the various pieces of evidence in support of a theme. We continued this process until we reached consensus. We translated quotes into English for the presentation of results and noted whether a theme was viewed by all (100%), most (75%), some (50%), or a few participants (25%). For ease of comparison, we categorized 10- to 13-year-old youth as younger adolescents, and 16- to 20-year-old youth as older adolescents.

We undertook several measures to secure saturation and theme stability. We conducted two in-depth interviews with each of the 18 family members. In addition, we triangulated themes against statements reported in previous interviews with the same families. For example, if families talked about how they communicated about the 2016 presidential election in the present study, we explored similarities with the families' overall communication patterns previously related to difficult topics and the political environment during SB1070. We compared the final categories with the raw data to label themes accurate to the data.

We acknowledge that our identities, prior work, and personal/professional interests may inherently influence the ways that we collected data, analyzed it, and constructed themes. We believe that anti-immigration climate can be detrimental to immigrant families and negatively affect parenting practices, yet we took extra care to manage biases against these practices in our analysis. For example, if caretakers reported keeping information about their immigration status to youth, we discussed as a team how secrecy could be adaptive in the current political climate. That is, we asked, "How could these communication patterns be an attempt to protect children emotionally, and/or to prevent children from disclosing to others outside the family that could jeopardize the family?"

RESULTS

Themes consisted of participants' (a) anticipatory emotions related to the election, and (b) management of emotions through external and internal coping.

Emotions Related to Election

Emotions related to the election were generally negative, but their saliency appeared to be influenced by time, expectations of the outcome, and family life cycle issues.

Caretakers—In May of 2016, caretakers' emotions about the upcoming election manifested in muted ways. Most caretakers, those from the Suárez, Torres, and Esparza families, did not expect that candidate Trump, who they viewed to espouse the most negative rhetoric against immigrants, would win the primaries. Caretakers from the Suárez family, especially, seemed to minimize the effect on their well-being, such as "It doesn't affect us," "We can't be bothered by these things." By November though, we observed emotions and heard descriptions of sadness, worry, and fear among all caretakers. Caretakers from all families expressed disbelief and talked about feeling sad and angry that Trump had advanced so far in the candidacy race. They tended to use more affect-laden words such as "terrorized," "horrified," and "traumatized" when describing their experience of the upcoming election. As this mother from the Esparza family stated, "Well, we are very mortified because if that man wins, you know, Trump, we're going to be so affected. You've seen how he's treated us...we are very scared."

With 1 day prior to and the day of the general election in November, all caretakers described how anticipation of the election impacted children emotionally. The father from the Suárez family described, "The suffering of being undocumented is felt by children...they are traumatized...even though you may not think that they feel it or notice it." His partner described, "It's the children we worry about...how they make sense of what is happening." Caretakers from all families were concerned about a rise in White supremacy that they observed in the months and days leading to the election, and the lack of outcry about this issue from many voters.

Although all caretakers expressed fear for their families in anticipation of Trump winning, the emotion seemed to be heightened for the García, Torres, and Esparza families, who had an unlikely path to citizenship. Although all caretakers were undocumented, the Suárez family was petitioning for a U Visa after the mother and oldest son were held at gunpoint in an attempted carjacking. The possibility of adjusting their status was indicated to assuage their fears. In November, the father from the Suárez family indicated, "Let God decide what will happen. There! It will be God's decision. Let's put it in His hands...If it is God's will for [Trump to win], it is because something good will come of it." Conversely, the stepfather from the Torres family described in November:

> This scares me. I tell [my wife], "it scares me that this will change the government." I can't say that I look for one person to win over another. But the consequences will be real and there is fear. I feel it. Many opportunities and jobs [for us] will be lost.

The mother from the Torres family expressed fear for her children because she perceived a lack of compassion from candidate Trump toward children of immigrant parents. She stated, "They say that [Republicans] even want to take away citizenship from children...What will happen to my daughters? That is what I worry about."

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For most caretakers, fear of the election outcome was related to the perceived vulnerability of protections previously afforded by the Obama administrations to youth of immigrant families. The Esparza and García families had unauthorized children who benefited from DACA, an Obama-era program that allowed emerging adults who arrived to the U.S. as children, to hold a driver's license and work permit, and to be protected from deportation. Caretakers from these families now feared that DACA might not only end with Trump's conservative agenda, but that DACA-registered families like theirs could be deported. The Suárez family who had not applied for their DACA-eligible child, on the other hand, vacillated between fear of applying for, and potentially losing, DACA, and regret for not applying, and potentially not protecting their child against deportation. This family felt in limbo, adopting a "wait and see" approach depending on the election outcome. In the Torres family, the mother expressed it was too risky to seek adjustment of the family's status. Her main concern was losing her healthcare assistance, which she needed to manage her advanced diabetes, as she indicated, "I pray for God's help with everything, my illness, so at least, as I said, I don't even hope for papers anymore. I just don't want to lose the little healthcare I get."

Although negative emotions prevailed among all caretakers, those from the Suárez and Esparza families also expressed hope in the midst of these negative events, such as how exposure to the news and events related to the election was raising critical consciousness in children. The father from the Suárez family proudly explained about citizen children in immigrant families:

> Our children see all the things that are happening...They will ask which party separates families and hurts families like theirs. When they become adults they will say, "I will not vote for a party that has done so much harm. I will vote for this other party."

Youth—Youth expressed similar fears and frustration as caretakers with the possibility of candidate Trump winning. In the November interviews, the 13-year-old citizen son from the Suárez family indicated, "What's going to happen to, like us, you know, so like my parents ..." Youth stated preference for Democrats, who they perceived to be supportive of immigrants.

Age and sibling position appeared to be relevant factors in youths' understanding of the political system across time points. Some younger adolescents within these families were less engaged with the political system than their older siblings. The youngest grandson of the García family, whose parents were deported nearly a decade ago, stated, "I don't pay attention to what is happening, it doesn't matter to me." Other young adolescents expressed mixed feelings about a possible Trump win. Our youngest participant, the Torres 10 year-old citizen daughter, described the possibility of the family being deported if Trump won as positive and negative:

> Well sometimes it makes me feel happy because I'm going to be with my family [in Mexico]. But sometimes no, because there's a lot of friends that I have here, that are born here. And you don't know where they might go or where they are from and you might get separated. Or family that was born somewhere else like in

> Atlanta, I have an uncle that was born in Atlanta. We might get separated and all that.

In contrast, her 12-year-old citizen sister seemed to clearly understand the ramifications of deportation. She feared watching the election returns because she could not bear to think that a new government might separate her family. She expressed, “Well I feel like kind of sad and scared, because like, I don’t want to be separated from my parents.” All older youth we interviewed expressed concern for themselves, their siblings, and their parents who have unauthorized status. The 19-year-old citizen son from the Esparza family shared strong emotions about the election in the November interview in comparison to May. He indicated that he and his family would feel shocked and angry if Trump won the election. He also reported that while his parents do not talk about the elections often, they have discussed with him the basics of a plan on what to do in case of family separation. His younger brother had not been privy to this conversation.

At the core of youth’s expressed fears in November about the election was the potential for family separation. In spite of having mixed feelings about deportation, the 10-year-old daughter from the Torres family indicated that she was most afraid of being separated from her family and being placed in foster care. She explained,

> I sometimes imagine it, like being separated from my family. Most of my family is Mexican, and I’m from here, and like I only have like a little bit of cousins because most of them [are in Mexico], and maybe kids go to the orphan and they get different family.

Having U.S. citizenship did not seem to protect children from worrying about their family. The 12-year-old daughter from the Torres family, who was born in the U.S., described her feelings about family separation as, “It makes me sad. I just sit down and just think about it.” In contrast, the youngest son from the Suárez family, age 13 and also born in the U.S., expressed less worry about Trump winning the election, indicating “Because we might be getting...Well [parents] might be getting their papers soon.” This youth also indicated that he and his parents would be fearful of a Trump victory if they were not processing a U Visa. As he indicated, “Because...Because [parents] know that they might have to leave.” This youth seemed to assume that his parents were protected from deportation, although they waited for the visa for several years without any protections.

Siblings with unauthorized status at times refrained from discussing their emotions related to the election. A 16-year-old son from the Suárez family argued that it does not make sense for him to follow or watch the election because he cannot vote. A 19-year-old son from the Esparza family similarly reported feeling stuck by the inability to vote and, hence, influence the election. He provided this viewpoint, “I don’t worry about it because I strongly feel like [Trump’s] not going to because...times are changing, it is not the same anymore. So, I don’t think that people would want to—want that for themselves.” Although this youth felt helpless about influencing the election due to his unauthorized status, he still felt hopeful rather than fearful that candidate Trump would not win. He also rested his hope on the judgment and action of others to prevent a negative election outcome.

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Managing Emotions through External and Internal Coping

Caretakers—Fear of a negative election outcome for immigrant families seemed to paralyze day-to-day actions of all caretakers and to increase avoidance of public exposure. In November, the Suárez mother said to have discouraged her 16-year-old son from applying to DACA because she feared a new administration could deport DACA recipients. In the García family, grandparents raising three adolescent boys wondered if the family should move to another house to be less traceable by a Trump administration because their oldest grandson was a DACA recipient. The Esparza caretakers described starting to run errands by driving on back roads, instead of highways or major streets, to avoid police or ICE encounters. They wondered if driving in the evenings instead of during the day would make them less visible to police.

Caretakers from all families also described ways in which they engaged in active external and internal processes to cope with the uncertainty of the election results. Caretakers from the Suárez family described taking their children to a march after SB1070 was passed in 2010 and indicated how empowered and unafraid that made them feel. They had not participated in a march in the months leading to the 2016 election because they feared negative ramifications on their pending legal residency. However, they expressed pride in their 20-year-old, U.S.-born son, who participated in canvassing and political events. Caretakers from the three remaining families, who were not in the process of alleviating their statuses, also mentioned a desire to participate in marches, but were afraid of the possible repercussions to the family.

Another active and external coping strategy was community solidarity and support. The Esparza mother used Facebook to find out about ICE activity in the area and to alert people in her social media network of ICE and police checkpoints. Tracking events on social media, and to a lesser degree, on newspapers and television, was another way in which caretakers from the three remaining families coped with uncertainty and helplessness. The grandfather from the García family read the newspaper daily to stay abreast of the candidates’ proposed policies and standing in the polls, with other families relying on the evening news for this type of information. Social media platforms were the most accessible, although caretakers often complained of the amount of “fake news” that appeared on their feed. One mother showed us anti-Clinton propaganda in Spanish that appeared on her Facebook feed.

A third active and external coping strategy was family communication. Most caretakers reported talking to children about what could happen if they were deported. Caretakers from the Suárez and Esparza families reassured their children by telling them “they shouldn’t be afraid,” “They would just start a new life in Mexico,” and “In the end, we’re foreigners.” The father from the Esparza family told his children that they had come to the U.S. for a better life but they had never found security in the U.S. This father also encouraged his children to continue their education and bilingual language skills so they could utilize them in Mexico if necessary.

A few caretakers also described communicating with their children about the importance of voting. The father from the Suárez family described, “ ...I tell my son, look at all the injustices out there...you can vote.” In contrast, the stepfather from the Torres family thought it best to protect his stepdaughters from what he considered upsetting and adult topics, such as the election. He indicated, “I think it is better not to expose children to politics...not too much. That is why we don’t talk about it.”

Caretakers also described internal strategies to cope with their emotions. All caretakers, with the exception of the García family, in our May interviews avoided to think about what would happen if Trump won. In the November interviews, these caretakers had pondered the families’ course of action if Trump won the election. The mother from the Esparza family had ruled out returning to Mexico because of poverty and violence there, but considered moving to Canada, where she had heard life was easier for immigrants. Her husband, on the other hand, was more set on returning to Mexico where he felt the family could “go back to its roots” and live free of discrimination. The Suárez caretakers were more willing to see what happened once they secured their permanent residency through a U Visa. They argued that faith in God would get them through the challenges they might have to face if Trump won.

Youth—Relative to caretakers, most youth seemed to rely on cognitive avoidance to cope with the uncertainty and helplessness they felt about the upcoming election. This was especially evident for the youth from the three families that had limited possibility of altering their families’ status in the near future. These youth indicated they generally tried not to worry about the election until the election results happened. The 17-year-old adolescent grandson from the García family indicated, “I mean I am not trying to think of what will happen...when it will or when it does happen then you know [how you’ll feel] (laughs).” Although his laughter suggests a minimization of the election, the fact that he indicated how he would feel when the election are over highlights the very importance of the election in this youth’s life. The 10-year-old daughter from the Torres family reported that she observed her sister would leave the room every time the news about election would come on beginning from the first time point in May.

The 16-year-old son from family Suárez, who lacks authorized status, expressed coping through a sense of hope and empowerment. He indicated that “Mexicans could prove Trump wrong by going to college and succeeding in life.” It is noted once again that this youth is from the family who both has a potential pathway toward citizenship and strongly relies on faith and religion to cope. As was seen with this youth’s parents, he and his younger brother both indicated that faith would get them through the consequences of the election.

Although in May all youth described learning about the election and its potential impact primarily from classmates and teachers in their schools, by November, most youth (with the exception of the García family) described learning about potential consequences of Trump winning from multiple sources, like the news and parents. The 13-year-old son from the Esparza family indicated, “I heard about the election information at school...people at school say this is the worst election ever.” As for learning about the election from parents, the same youth indicated that he has not engaged in in-depth conversations about political issues, but rather more on the qualities associated with candidate Trump, “[Trump] thinks about himself and thinks about other people that have money and he’s just racist.” Several youth described talking openly with their classmates about what they had learned about election.

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In contrast to caretakers' reports that they had open conversations with their children about fear of immigrant backlash with the election, most youth reported dissatisfaction with the quality of these conversations. They often overheard parents discuss the election but most youth described not having had direct conversations with their caretakers about election or potential consequences. Conversations felt to youth as being unilateral and sparse, mostly focused on reassurance. The 10-year-old daughter from the Torres family indicated, "Well we just, like, see stuff in the news but, like, we don't really like talking about it."

DISCUSSION

In the present study, we explored the emotional experiences of mixed-status Mexican-origin families related to the 2016 presidential election, 6 months prior and up to the day of the election. Consistent with the MECA model (Falicov, 2014, 2017), the fear and sadness expressed by caretakers and youth appeared to be influenced by (a) immigration status and adjustment of status (immigration and acculturation domain), (b) interactions they had with others outside of the family (ecological context domain), (c) family communication and other coping strategies (family organization domain), and (d) age, transitions, and tasks (family life cycle domain).

The immediacy of the election and the possibility of a Trump presidency seemed to heighten participants' emotions and the expected likelihood of harm to immigrant families like theirs. Facing an unknown and uncontrollable outcome may have left participants feeling as helpless spectators of their own fate. Grace, Bais, and Roth (2018) used the term "violence of uncertainty" to explain how chronic and impending threats of family separation and deportation can break down a young person's defenses and lead to depression and anxiety. Our study offers a glimpse into the emotional experience of families (e.g., feeling traumatized, sad, worried) with authorized and unauthorized members as they anticipated a sociopolitical event in real time.

The role of age and sibling position

The intense emotions experienced by caretakers and older adolescents in the days leading to the election may have expressed in more muted ways for younger adolescents. Adolescence marks a transition to more complex cognitive appraisals and to greater access to information from within and outside the family (Christophe et al., 2019). Thus, older adolescents and their caretakers may have comprehended more fully the implications of the current political system than younger adolescents, the latter of whom may have also been sheltered by caretakers from information about the election.

As suggested in other research with Latino families, the age of the child might influence a parent's decision to talk about political issues like documentation status and deportation, in an effort to either shelter them or inform them about these realities (Philbin & Ayón, 2016). Our interviews unveiled a trend for older adolescents to be more aware of political issues compared to younger adolescents. Yet, sibling order appeared to matter as much as age. For example, the oldest daughter from the Torres family, who was 12 years old, appeared to be more cognizant of the elections than the middle and younger grandsons who were 17 and 13 years old from the García family. Within these families, the older siblings seemed to be more

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informed than their younger siblings, suggesting that age and sibling order may influence the type of information they are exposed to about the political system. Although younger youth partake in activities that are defined by the political system within their everyday contexts (Millei & Kallio, 2018), such as losing a parent to deportation, constructs such as immigration, documentation status, and social discourse and policy may have been difficult to grasp. Future research should deliberately examine age differences across families and differences between siblings within families, to inform age-appropriate racial socialization practices and tailored family messages to support coping.

The role of immigration status

Youth with unauthorized status in our study perceived a threat to their family from the election. Even youth who were born in the U.S., and hence were U.S. citizens, reported negative feelings related to the anti-immigrant rhetoric espoused by then candidate Trump. Citizen youth appeared to exhibit the same angst, if not more, and investment in watching the election as their noncitizen siblings and parents. Vargas et al. (2018) found that U.S.-born Latinx persons with a connection to immigrants who have been deported have higher likelihood of reporting a mental health need than those without a connection to a deportee. For mixed-status families, citizenship may not protect children from the pernicious effects of immigration policy and the rhetoric that pervaded the 2016 presidential election.

Conversely, the possibility of adjustment of immigration status for the whole family may have attenuated emotions about the election. A family in our study (the Suárez family) was petitioning for permanent resident status through a U Visa, available on the basis and proof of having been a victim of a crime. This potential adjustment seemed to take pressure off from the election. One other family in our study, the García family, had been a victim of a crime and hence could have petitioned for a U Visa, but the fear of being identified by immigration officials had deterred them from pursuing a potential adjustment of status. In essence, this family would rather live “under the radar” and in chronic fear throughout everyday spaces than to risk deportation and family separation, which they feared might happen if they were traced by the federal government.

Management of Emotions and Coping

As the election neared, many participants coped with their fear by avoiding public places. They devised specific strategies to avoid encounters with police and ICE, such as moving or driving at night or through back roads, which can isolate them from their support systems. Risk of public exposure likely restrains mixed-status families from seeking the very interpersonal support and mental health services they and their children need to cope with a hostile environment (Roche et al., 2018). Toomey et al. (2014) found that immigrants avoid utilizing social resources to which their U.S.-born children are entitled, out of fear of reprisal. Fear and avoidance of services has only been heightened by recent Public Charge legislation that prohibits eligibility for permanent residency for individuals with unauthorized status that have utilized social services (U.S. Citizenship & Immigration Services, 2019). This situation poses a dilemma for family practitioners interested in serving these vulnerable families.

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Within the family, participants dealt with their emotional experiences in different ways and perhaps consistent with their general patterns of communications. First, caretakers stressed the importance of family communication, which other researchers have found to be a key strategy Mexican parents employ to protect children from anti-immigration discourse (Philbin & Ayón, 2016). Yet, many youth felt dissatisfied with these conversations, wishing they were more deliberate, ongoing, and youth-directed. Acculturative differences between caretakers and youth may explain expectations of youth to express their needs more fully (Falicov, 2014). Additionally, researchers have found that parents avoid conversations about immigration to protect children (Cardoso, Scott, Faulkner, & Lane, 2018; Gulbas & Zayas, 2017) or because they do not feel prepared to comfort children on topics of discrimination (Hughes et al., 2006).

From a strength-based perspective, protecting youth from these types of conversations and instilling hope in a better future, a strategy known as shift-and-persist (Christophe et al., 2019), may be intended to help youth frame and make meaning of stressors that are out of their control with optimism. Ayón, Tran, and Nieri (2019) similarly found that expressing gratitude, appreciation for diversity, and optimism for the future via advocacy and community empowerment were ways in which Latinx immigrant parents protected children from the harmful effects of anti-immigration climate. There were many examples in our study of parents feeling proud of their citizen youth's ability to vote and rectify injustice, and of youth choosing not to think about or watch the election unfold. Family practitioners and researchers would do well to explore this coping strategy of detachment and hope as a protective factor for mixed-status families facing chronic immigration-related stress (Christophe et al., 2019).

Implications for Practice

Our findings may offer key considerations for family practitioners interested in working with immigrant families under the current sociopolitical environment. First, because families' experiences appear to be largely centered in their immigration statuses, family practitioners need to situate their own experiences in these domains and identify sources of shared and divergent experience and values (Falicov, 2014). It is especially important to avoid the assumption that citizenship protects youth from mixed-status families in the same way as it does for practitioners without an immigrant background.

Second, in terms of specific paths to intervention within the clinical encounter, practitioners should assess the range and intensity of emotions experienced by mixed-status families in their everyday spaces as they face a hostile ecological and political environment. Caretakers in our study feared their children were being "traumatized" by the political climate. Addressing caretakers' concerns and fears that their children may be harmed by this climate (e.g., losing DACA), should be a priority, as well as formally assessing symptoms of trauma that may derive from these experiences and from other common sources of stress in our study, such as crime. Moreover, practitioners should explore children's perceived threats to their well-being and to their most important attachments, their caretakers (Rojas-Flores et al., 2017), two concerns that were distinctively raised by youth in our study.

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In intervening with the family system, practitioners could explore and support communication within the family related to their emotions and experiences (Falicov, 2014). One strategy may be to realign caretaker and youth conversations so that caretakers and youth have a shared understanding of their experience (Valdez, Abegglen, & Hauser, 2013). But care must be given not to pathologize caretaker silence or reassurance because these may be reflective of acculturative gaps and a shift-and-persist strategy that has been found to be protective for low-income families facing chronic stress (Chen, 2012; Christophe et al., 2019). Conversations should support narratives of strength, resistance, and healing, which are elements of racial socialization practices in immigrant families (Philbin & Ayón, 2016), such as parents resting their hopes on their children’s future, relying on religious beliefs and practices for comfort and purpose, and children focusing on the present to disconnect from stressful environments (Falicov, 2009).

Attention to the family life cycle may also be valuable, as some children who have experienced their parents’ deportation, as two of our participating families had, go under the care of a grandparent, a single parent, or a step-parent household. These changes pose significant stress on caretakers and youth who have to realign emotional processes and developmental tasks (Clark, Glick, & Bures, 2009). Immigration status may limit adolescents’ autonomy and agency; signs of resistance, which a few of our adolescent participants may have exercised as lack of interest in the political system, should be further explored and honored.

Third and finally, social justice should drive practitioners’ actions outside the clinical setting through collaboration and advocacy (Lewis, Lewis, Daniels & D’Andrea, 2011; Valdez et al., 2019). Practitioners could collaborate with schools and community organizations to develop programming to strengthen families’ social networks (Valdez et al., 2019) and thereby to prevent the risk for isolation found in our study. Policy- and community-driven efforts such as *platicas* (forums) and civic action are a logical step, and one that family practitioners with knowledge of systems are equipped to undertake.

Implications for Policy

In our study, immigration status and opportunity to adjust such status played a central role in the experiences of mixed-status families leading up to the election. The Promise and Dream Act proposed in congress lays out a humane and inclusive pathway to citizenship for immigrant youth and individuals with protected status or deferred action (H.R.6, 2019). However, our study findings suggest that policy that protects the whole family is crucial to the well-being of citizen youth. Recent congressional hearings by family, community, and developmental scientists and policy positions by professional associations on this issue are another important way to influence policy.

Limitations

Our study was based on a few families that were part of a larger study, and those families may have not been representative of other immigrant or even mixed-status families. We await future research with larger sample sizes to corroborate our findings and their applicability to the population. Our study included mixed-status families only; thus, it was not clear how families in which all members are undocumented anticipated the 2016 elections. Nevertheless, our hope is to provide valuable insights about the experience of mixed-status families, which constitute a large portion of all immigrant families. An additional limitation is that our interviews occurred during a time-limited event, the presidential election of 2016. It is possible that emotions and coping strategies changed after the election. Understanding postelection experiences as new policies have been put into place (i.e., termination of DACA, family separations at the border, the Public Charge Rule) is an important next step in understanding the well-being of immigrant families.

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TABLE 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Family documentation status	Age	Monthly income	Caregiver occupation
Family Suárez [a] Father/mother undocumented	50/46	$2,400	SE home repairs/SAH
Two sons US-born citizens	20, 13		
One son undocumented	16		
Family García Grandfather/Grandmother undocumented	60/61	$1,000	SE Service/Service
One grandson DACAmented	18		
Two grandsons US-born citizen	17, 13		
Family Torres Mother/Stepfather undocumented	38/32	$1,800	Construction/SAH
Two daughters US-born citizens	12, 10		
Family Esparza Father/Mother undocumented	42/42	$2,600	Horticulture/SAH
One son DACAmented	19		
One son US-born citizen	13		

Note. Documentation status and age reported at the time of the May 2016 interviews.

SE = Self-employed; SAH = Stay at home.

[a] Family last names are pseudonyms to protect participants' confidentiality.