



National Center for Mental Health Promotion
and Youth Violence Prevention

**TELECONFERENCE:
Facilitating Positive Development in Immigrant Youth
February 28th, 2005
2:00 PM- 3:30 PM**

Speaker Bio:

Carola Suárez-Orozco is Associate Professor of Applied Psychology and Teaching & Learning at New York University's Steinhardt School of Education and Co-Director of Immigration Studies at NYU.

Prior to moving to NYU, Dr. Suárez-Orozco was the co-founder & co-Director of the Harvard Immigration Project. From 1997 to 2003, she was the Managing Director of the Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation Study. This interdisciplinary research project examined the adaptations over time of Central American, Chinese, Dominican, Haitian, and Mexican immigrant adolescents to American schools and society.

Carola Suárez-Orozco received her Ph.D. from U.C. Berkeley in clinical psychology. Her research focus in recent years has been on the intersection of cultural and psychological factors in the adaptation of immigrant and ethnic minority youth. Dr. Suárez-Orozco has published widely in the areas of cultural psychology, academic engagement, immigrant youth, and identity formation. Together with Marcelo Suárez-Orozco, she is the co-author of *Children of Immigration and Transformations: Migration, Family Life, and Achievement Motivation Among Latino Adolescents*. She is also co-editor of the six volume series, entitled *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on The New Immigration* (with Desirée Qin-Hillard). Dr. Suárez-Orozco has also published numerous articles and chapters on topic such as academic engagement, the role of the "social mirror" in identity formation, immigrant family separations, the role of mentors in facilitating positive development in immigrant youth, and the gendered experiences of immigrant youth.

Speaker Presentation:

1. Now that our listeners have heard about your background and professional accomplishments, we were hoping that you could speak a little bit about your personal and professional motivation for this line of work. What got you interested in this line of work?

- Professional commitment usually starts with a personal interest. She immigrated to this country at the age of five, and married an immigrant at the age of 18.
- When she was young, because she spoke Spanish, she ended up working with the Latino community, although she didn't have any training at the time. She saw herself as a counselor in the Latino community and this motivated her to learn more about the issues facing Latino families.
- During a doctorate level class, she had a moment where the "window opened into a whole new world." She saw that immigration was a process that affected people in similar ways all over the world.

2. Could you please describe the research that you carried out in the Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation Study? Briefly, what are some of the main findings that you would like to share?

- This was a five-year longitudinal study that was interdisciplinary and comparative in nature. What we were interested in understanding and documenting the continuities and discontinuities of immigrant children.
- We recruited children, ages 9-15, who had recently relocated from Mexico, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, China, and Central America. For 5 years, we followed them: interviewing them, their parents, gathering school records/reports, achievement and language testing, and ethnography to see how they were adapting to the new setting.
- We tried to answer the questions: How are immigrant youth engaged in schools – at the cognitive, behavioral, and social levels? How does this engagement change over time?
- Finding: Immigrant children generally start out optimistic and hopeful about the school process and were engaged in the initial years. However, this engagement begins to wane for many of the children. A number of factors determine whether or not this attitude continues and is accompanied by positive experience.
- Some of these factors include: Language skills, family factors, neighborhood factors. One critical predictor is the nature of children's *relationships* in both school and neighborhood. A mentoring relationship with an adult can make a tremendous difference in helping children maintain that hope and engagement in school.

3. What are the main stressors that immigrant children and families face as they make the adjustment to life in the United States?

- The stressors are many. However, we need to remember that immigrants wouldn't come to a new country (uproot their old life) without the prospect of new gains.
- First there are the pre-migration stresses. Often there is a PUSH from the familiar space. Sometimes they being pushed out of their country of origin because of persecution, or economic crisis, or an act of nature. Sometimes they are leaving to reunite with family members who have already left the origin country.
- Stresses during migration:
 - The border crossing can be dangerous. Many cross illegally from Mexico, where 1-2 people die every day.
 - The rape rate for women is high. 1 in 4 experiences rape during the crossing.
- Post-migration:
 - People have roles and predictable behaviors/ "ways of being" in their old country that they are no longer able to use.
 - People have to relearn "rules of engagement" such as: How far to stand from someone; How loud your voice should be; How important is punctuality; What are appropriate roles for parents in schools and communities.
 - There are social rules that immigrants didn't have to think about in their own culture. But now, being displaced, they have to think about these rules all the time. There aren't many guidelines to explain what you should and shouldn't do.
 - Any transition is stressful, and this relocation combines some of the most stressful types of transition all at once (e.g., new home, new country, separation from family)
 - Stress sometimes leads to negative health outcomes.
 - There are daily hassles of life in a new place where they don't speak the language and don't know how things work. These changes are disorienting because suddenly they don't have the skills to do things for themselves. One immigrant said, "I became an infant again."
 - People are stripped of their familiar roles. They don't have a sense of their competence as they knew it before. They feel marginalized – like they don't belong. This feeling leads to a sense of loss and psychological problems.
 - In some cases, immigrants experience outright discrimination and hostility.

4. I know that you have done a great deal of research in the area of family separation as part of the experience of immigration. What are some of the typical patterns that families follow when moving to this country, and what impact does this have on the development and the emotional or psychological experience of children and adolescents?

- In her role as a family therapist, Carola was struck by the problems experienced by families that had been separated during the migration process. In this study, she had to start with a baseline of information to establish the background, motivation, and processes for coming.
 - What was the migratory process like for the family?
 - What propelled them to come?
 - Who came first?
 - What region of the country of origin did they come from (urban, rural, suburban?)
- Findings: Only 15% of the families in the study arrived all at the same time. 85% were separated from one or both parents for times ranging from 6 mo – 10 years. What does this mean for the psychological well-being of the kids?
- Patterns:
 - Chinese families were more likely to come all together, but 37% still came separately.
 - 98% of Haitian and Central American families had been separated at some time.
 - With Haitians, fathers tend to leave the wife and children, visit periodically, send for only the children 8 – 10 years later. These children not only enter into a new country, but also generally a new family (father has repartnered).
 - With Central Americans, mothers often come first, leave small children behind with relatives, and work for 5-10 years before sending for the young children.
 - With Mexicans, the pattern is for the father to come first, then the wife, and finally the children – after a much shorter time of separation.
- Is there a correlation between separation and depression? Depression was less likely if the entire family came together or the separation was short.
- More significant are the tremendous family issues that come up at the time of reunification.
 - Children are torn between feeling happy to be with their parents but also missing their caretakers and country of origin.
 - If there are new children in the family, the children who had been left behind in the country of origin often experience a great deal of anger, while the parents expressed leaving them behind as a tremendous sacrifice on their part.
 - Many parents have lost a sense of authority because they have not raised the children from infancy.
- In some cultures, family separation is a common fact of life – parents often send their children to live with relatives for education, economic reasons, etc. In these cultures, the stress related to separation is not as significant.
- Also, the level of positive connection during the time of separation is a big factor. If the relatives in the home country talked about the positive reasons why parents were away, and parents communicated frequently, often the trauma was reduced for children.

5. What are the issues that most define the intergenerational conflict for Latino immigrant youth and families?

- The cases that we see in treatment centers and community mental health facilities are the families with the highest level of difficulty. Intergenerational conflict is common, but not as great as one might expect.
- Comparison study re: family dynamics and relationships. Four populations were compared, and rated from least to most conflict:
 - 1) Mexican families in Mexico – *least conflict*
 - 2) Recent immigrants living in the U.S.
 - 3) Second generation immigrants in the U.S.
 - 4) Anglo families in the U.S. showed the *highest level of conflict*.

- The more acculturated children were to American norms (e.g., parents are clueless; it's OK to talk back to parents) the greater the level of conflict there was.
- Parents' experiences are not as useful in this country as they were in the country of origin, so often they lose their role as expert or elder.
 - In their country of origin, parents know the rules. But here, they tend to learn the rules from their children since children tend to be much quicker with acculturation.
 - Also, in many cases children are privy to information that they would not have known back home, especially if they are expected to serve as translators in medical or legal areas. Children can also "creatively translate" the situations to better fit their needs, but it isn't always honest and the parents have no way to check this.
- Discipline mechanisms also pose conflicts between parents and youth. Spanking in many cultures is an accepted way to get children to behave. However, parents can't use this method of discipline because their children threaten to call 911. So parents lose control of children because they may not have knowledge of other discipline strategies.
- Many immigrant parents view American culture as toxic, that it's not good for the family dynamic. When they try to control their children's contact with more Americanized children (their children's new friends), the children rebel.
- Miscommunication is a main source of conflict. Children's native language starts to atrophy, whereas the parents continue in the native tongue, learning English slowly. Therefore, in an argument, you have both sides trying to communicate in their chosen language (English for children and language of origin for parents) each understanding only some of what the other says.
 - This happened most in Haitian and Chinese cultures where there aren't radio stations, magazines, or television programs in the native language, as there are in Spanish.
- Finally, all the stressors not only affect the children, but they also affect the parents.
 - Parental depression is typical, leaving parents less available emotionally for children.
 - Parental absence due to job requirements means that parents are often not present physically as well as psychologically.

6. As project directors, practitioners, and parents, how can we foster psychological well being for immigrant youth in our communities?

- Recognize that relationships make a huge difference: family, community, school. It is vitally important to strengthen relationships at all levels.
 - Family: We need to bring together families in similar situations.
 - Taking immigration and its challenges out of the "shame space."
 - Making parents aware that that many of these problems happen because of the immigration process, not because of their parenting skills or community.
 - Community: We need to develop a community of people working together and thinking together – a place where strategies are exchanged, and parents can feel supported.
 - In non-immigrant middle-class communities, the community is where parents find out information to help their children succeed (e.g., the right classes to take, and the best internships for their kids to apply to). In immigrant communities, this information is difficult to come by.
 - School: We need to develop school/community relationships so that the school can become the *de facto* community center.
 - Where parents can feel welcome.
 - Where parents can participate.
 - Where parents can feel that their children's well-being is being looked out for.
- Normalize the experience that immigrant youth are having.

Questions and Answers:

What are some modifications to traditional psychological treatment that have been found to be useful with depressed Latino families? - Randy Rains, CA

- Cognitive-behavioral intervention strategies have shown to be successful with this population.
- For an example, contact Rose Marie Perez-Foster – rpf1@nyu.edu

How can we foster educational well being for our immigrant youth? What are some of the predictors of academic success? How can successful strategies be integrated on an institutional level?

- Challenge: Many of the strategies were developed for primary school children under the assumption that immigrants children came to America when they are little. However, many arrive during the secondary school years.
- There is a disconnect between services provided and the actual needs of children. An example of this is the one-size-fits-all school reform. The emphasis on testing is creating barriers for immigrant children.
- Successful schools are facing the realities of the students they teach.
 - Develop in-depth analysis to really work with the immigrant children's academic strengths and weaknesses. Just because they don't speak English doesn't mean they don't do math well.
 - To engage children, they must have high expectations and keep children engaged in the learning process.
 - Recognize that English skills take a long time to acquire. A one-year immersion process doesn't take into account the fact that it takes 5 – 7 years to learn how to read and write, as well as to do well on the multiple-choice questions that make up standardized tests).
 - Provide immigrant children with a great deal more homework support.
- Predictors: Parents education is a predictor of academic success. The community and school also have a huge impact.
- #1 predictor of grades: Do the children do the "stuff" of school. Are they behaviorally engaged in school? Do they get to class? Do they do their homework?
- #1 predictor of behavioral engagement: What kinds of relationships do children have in school?
 - Develop good academic behaviors. Help children stay engaged, stay focused, believe in themselves. Keep in the game when they hit the inevitable frustrations.

How can we specifically train middle school and high school administrators to effectively engage immigrant families and to understand that not all families will respond positively to the same proven strategies? This does not mean that immigrant families are not concerned about their children or that they are not looking out for the best interest of their children. Rather, it may be that the school's family involvement strategy might not fit culturally with the way that immigrant families operate (e.g., they are not allowed to bring their children to parent meetings, or the language environment is not bilingual)

- The American education model is one in which parents are very involved with their children's education. White middle-class parents tend to be very hands-on, PTA-attending participants.
- Immigrant parents who are involved, vocal, and advocates for their children's education, are often viewed in their cultures of origin as disrespectful to teachers.
- Immigrant parents tend to work longer hours and later at night. They often do not have the flexible schedule or are in the position to ask for time off. Therefore, it's more difficult for them to attend school meetings.
- There is also a level of comfort that needs to be provided for immigrants to feel comfortable attending meetings with teachers. Is there a bilingual option?
- Teachers tend to use homework as a judgement mechanism to determine who are the good and bad students. However, homework tends to be biased toward students who come from middle-class homes with educated parents who can provide resources and own computers.

Comment from Spokane, WA:

In light of the previous comment, often it's good for educators to go to the families. We often go to where the immigrants gather (e.g., churches), and we bring in college students who were immigrant children, so there is a trust level established. We provide information that parents will need to make the most of their children's education. We explain the hidden rules of the middle class/white school system. We also provide important messages via VHS or audio tapes in their native language. This strategy reduces the issue of mistrust that sometimes arises from having to hear the message through a third party.

Comment from Santa Anna, CA:

We just finished a study with focus groups, made up of parents and community members, to find out why parents are not participating in the school. Our population consists of first generation Mexican immigrants. Parents in the community often feel that they are not welcome at school, often due to the language barrier. There is also a big disconnect in terms of perception: Teachers say that parents are not teaching the children discipline, while parents believe that teachers are not using discipline in the classroom. For parents, discipline means teaching children values at school ("educación) while for teachers, discipline means having a routine, homework schedule, etc. Parents and teachers are both blaming, both talking about education – but their concepts are different. Often parents are working and not available, and sometimes the whole family lives in one room, which makes homework routines very difficult. Now we are working on what parents can do. We are trying to give them a basic level of literacy, while teaching them how the schools work and how they can get involved, even if they don't have formal education. We have gotten involved in a program on Saturdays in collaboration with the Mexican consulate, in which parents learn to read and write correctly in Spanish, and can get an elementary or high school diploma from Mexico.

Carola's reply: This is a wonderful program. Not only are parents learning tangible skills that will help them and help their children, they are also serving as role models regarding the value of education, by enacting it in their own lives.

When you are using a universal curriculum, how can you incorporate cultural awareness?

- You have to begin with a deeply held philosophical belief system that includes:
 - Every person is equally valuable, regardless of where they come from.
 - We are not all dealt the same high cards, but we must work with what we have.
 - Every culture is valuable, and children should be invited to share their culture.
 - Schools should provide music, literature, movies from different cultures to show the relativism of the human experience and how there are common denominators in all.

How can we foster collaboration and communication between first- and second- generation Americans and new immigrants that will empower our communities to provide effective tools for our children?

- People tend to find ways to divide themselves, and to focus on the differences rather than similarities. Who is in? Who is out? It's typical that the 2nd generation tends to have resentment towards the first generation.
- First generation immigrants have a dual frame of reference. They can see the stresses where they are living, but they also recognize that they are better off in some ways.
 - They arrive with hope.
 - They bring a willingness to work.
- Second generation immigrants are less positive – more bitter and disgruntled. They sometimes are embarrassed by newer immigrants, seeing them as driving down wages. They don't want to be reminded of the struggles they went through in the past.

Closing:

- Thank you very much for sharing with us your work and knowledge.
- We will email participants an evaluation form. Please email it back to us telling us what you found helpful or any suggestions you might have.
- We will be sending the notes from this teleconference to participants, as well as the article that Dr. Carola Suárez-Orozco wrote, *Engaging Children of Immigrants*.

**Date of next teleconference for the Latino Networking Group:
Thursday, April 28th, 2005**