

# Continuity and Change: Lessons from Immigrant Families

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Immigrants face the complex reality of adapting to a new culture, while simultaneously having to cope with normal developmental changes. When immigrant families seek intervention, therapists may do well to focus on continuity as well as on change, i.e., accepting that some things should stay the way they are, at least in the present moment, even if they do not perfectly align with their new environment. This approach can create a reassuring familiarity, while giving clients the tools to cope with excessive anxiety and curb further disorganization that can result from the challenges presented by therapy itself.

The clinical vignettes that follow involve aspects of the therapy with two middle class families at early stages of cultural transition from Mexico:

## ***Case 1: “Pretend you are staying; that will help you in case you go back.”***

The first vignette is about a young Jewish couple, two years post emigrating from Mexico. The wife is depressed, and reports that she misses her home, parents, and friends. The husband, an upwardly mobile entrepreneur, expresses irritation toward her emotional state, stating that she had acknowledged, when they got married, his plan to move to the United States in order to start a business. The wife acquiesces, but states that she did not know then that he was “asking (her) to live with half (her) heart here, the other half back where ‘there are mountains of love ... wasting away’.” The husband, who is satisfied with the love he gets from his parents and friends during visits to Mexico, seems to believe that his wife phones her parents too much. (The wife’s behavior is consistent with what might be expected in her culture and gender. The strong, nurturant, and controlling attachment between parents and children, observed in families that combine Latin and Jewish cultures is often accentuated in Mexico. This is likely the result of their intense experience of the social and identity problems associated with being a non-assimilated ethnic and religious minority).

I empathize with the wife, acknowledging how much she must miss her kin network, and how isolated she feels in the States with a young child and her husband as her only social network. I wonder aloud if she felt that she had the right to ask her husband to follow her back home this time, if things did not work out for her here. The husband begins to see that he needs to be more understanding of her love losses, and becomes less defensive of the choices they made. With these validations, her own ambivalence begins to emerge.

Although she now misses the values and life style of her country and community, she recalls how she too, had wanted to leave Mexico. She had seen it as an opportunity to separate from her sometimes too controlling mother. She had felt that she could "grow more" in this country in the long run. Suddenly, she begins to weep, and says she misses her friends back home. She then reveals a recent embarrassing social disappointment. For the past year, she had been part of a mother - child playgroup. A month ago, she and one of the other mothers, all of whom are Jewish Mexican immigrants, had a nasty falling out. The other two women sided with the other mother and she had to leave the group, thus, eliminating an important support and modeling peer network. Since then, she had been thinking and talking a lot about returning. We talked about how they, husband and wife, could use what they had learned about her present needs from the playgroup experience. I also asked them if they could consider a postponement of a decision about staying or returning for a set period of time. This led to a conversation about how this temporary stability could be used, for example to acquire skills, learn English, develop a support group, improve their communication. It could be a period of building that would serve them well, whether they stayed here or went back. In the wife's words, a chance to "grow more." Pretending to stay did not mean they should not continue all the attachments as if they were returning too, such as frequent phone calls, etc. If after this time she still felt lonesome, she could resume a more focused campaign to go back.

The oscillation between staying and returning, the comparison between the here and the there, the clinging to the old pieces of attachment even when one is trying to get away from them, is part and parcel of the process of migration. This is not pathological ambivalence, although it may be temporarily connected to symptoms such as anxiety or depression. It is important to accept the oscillation, the not knowing, the ambiguity, and the uncertainty, and to entertain different "as if" positions (as if you are staying, as if you are going back.) The decision cannot be rushed. It seems likely that a common outcome of migration is not an either/or choice. Developing a theme of increasing competence and life experience that enhance self and relationships anywhere, can serve to create temporary deadlines that act as stabilities. To know whether or not to buy a couch if you are not staying here may be a problem, but signing up for an English class should not be. Anything you can take with you goes.

***Case 2: "It is okay to handle your home just the way your mother did."***

A young Mexican Catholic couple were facing multiple life cycle transitions along with the many changes imposed by migration. Within a period of four years, they had married, had their first child, and migrated to San Diego, where had their second child right away. They were expecting a third child when they came to therapy. To add to these rapid transitions, the husband's company was growing exponentially, and it was possible that they would have to move to New York. They were both young and had lived with their parents up to the time of their marriage. Each was still struggling with developmental issues of separation/individuation from their families. The myriad

accommodations of early marriage in a couple with an asymmetrical style of communication were also part of the equation, e.g., she wanted to watch TV in bed, he wanted to read; he wanted to wake early in the morning, she wanted to sleep in, and so forth. They were also assuming the huge physical and emotional responsibilities of entering parenthood for the third time while still taking care of two very young children, in a country foreign to them, and without extended family support. The wife was concerned about the arrival of the third child and how she was going to handle the different needs and schedules of all family members. She wanted to hire a second helper to care for the children, in addition to the one they hired to help with house-cleaning. The husband objected vehemently to this idea. The house was too small and he needed his privacy. He criticized the wife for worrying too much about keeping a perfectly clean house, preparing elaborate meals, and entertaining too lavishly, unlike her middle-class, American counterparts who did fine without outside help.

It did not seem to me that the husband was suggesting a more egalitarian division of labor in the home, since there was no mention of it. When I asked to clarify, it was obvious that both husband and wife adhered wholeheartedly to traditional roles and division of labor. As we explored together the meaning and actions attached to their role definitions, it emerged that they were both satisfied with their current arrangement. The husband's interference had more to do with the circumstances of migration, i.e., living in a much smaller house and having a limited family and social life had made him more aware and controlling of household decisions than he would have been in Mexico. By stating his own strong opinions he was encroaching on his wife's domain, while she was not in any way involved in decision-making in his domain. He was introducing asymmetry in a complimentary task performance arrangement. The wife resisted; her sense of self was greatly derived from the cleanliness of her house, the variety of the meals she cooked and the exercise she did outside the home which she could only do with household help. She argued that if they had stayed in Mexico she would have even more help than she was asking for now; the matriarchs in her family ran their homes with the help of two maids, a cook, a gardener, and a chauffeur. Her husband was asking her to depart too drastically from the customs of her past. : Another important reason for her resistance involved their frequent visitors from Mexico; it was a matter of pride to show that her ways and her status had not changed. A home that recreated the cultural features of the homes she knew in Mexico was comforting and reassuring. "Is it old-fashioned," she said, "to want to have a house JUST LIKE my mother's?" She was holding on to her cultural and family identity. As she was separating from her parents and becoming a mother herself, she was embracing her mother's skills at running her household. Under the guise of modernization, the husband was dislocating structural continuities at a time of massive changes. They were at a polarized and volatile impasse.

The therapeutic dilemma was that the immediate clinical goal was to support stability, particularly because the baby's birth was approaching. The simplest and most fair avenue was to validate the wife's decisions and her rights as a homemaker. Yet, I worried that in

an attempt to secure family stability, I might downplay the possibility that both husband and wife were part of a prevailing cultural system that must regard the wife's sphere as less worthy of respect if it can be so easily invaded by the husband's views. Was the husband's interference with the wife's decisions an indication of a power imbalance that needed to be addressed at the risk of creating even more untimely stress? And wasn't it important to understand the husband's predicament in the new environment? I decided to share my dilemma with them. This generated a discussion from which it emerged that the sense of asymmetry came not from the distribution of tasks but from the husband treating the wife as a child in need of correction when in fact she was a 23 year old woman, mother, wife, and administrator of her household. It also became clear that a key balancing element in the traditional middle class household is the employment of maids. Siding with creating a stable environment to face multiple changes required that this family would not differ too much from a well-established cultural norm where the wife is in charge of the household but she decides how much and what type of help is needed. Empathy for the husband for the difficulties of migration led to an exploration of his affectional (family and friends) and physical losses (space) that he may have been avoiding by attempting to change his wife.

The two cases described here represent intersections and questions about issues of cultural transition. In each case, there are several variables to take into account: the individuals' developmental stages and interpersonal dynamics, the developmental stage of the family cycle, the stage of acculturation, and the cultural preferences about family organization. They all offer possibilities and constraints to stability and change. The goal of therapy was not to protect the clients from change, but to protect them from the excessive anxiety, further polarization and disorganization that can result from adding challenges to their lives in the name of therapy.

*For more illustrations of case studies, see Falicov, C. J. Latino Families in Therapy (2014) 2nd Ed. New York: Guilford Press.*