



Context and culture in the socialization and development of personal achievement values: Comparing Latino immigrant families, European American families, and elementary school teachers



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 23 June 2010

Received in revised form 14 November 2012

Accepted 25 November 2012

Available online 26 January 2013

Keywords:

Immigrant children

Immigrant families

Cultural values

Individualism

Collectivism

Familism

ABSTRACT

We documented cross-cultural similarities and differences in values concerning personal achievement between Latino immigrant parents, a group of multiethnic teachers, and European American parents. We also explored intergenerational similarities and differences between parents and their fifth-grade children. The theoretical premise was that sociodemographic factors, such as education, drive cultural values, with more formal education associated with individualistic values and less formal education associated with collectivistic/familistic values. Responding to open-ended social dilemmas relevant to family life, Latino immigrant parents, averaging a fifth-grade education, responded more familistically than the more highly educated multiethnic teachers or European American parents. In contrast, no group differences in values showed up in situations where school practices do not directly impact family life. Intergenerational differences were few; but, in family-centered scenarios, European American fifth graders were significantly more collectivistic than European American parents, a finding that suggested the possibility that, in an individualistic culture, individualism is socialized with age.

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Acculturation (to the dominant society) and enculturation (within the family) have been treated very extensively in immigrant populations in terms of self-reports concerning attitudes towards and behaviors characterizing host society and immigrant ethnic group (e.g., Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006). However, the acculturation and enculturation of values – the presuppositions concerning priorities that are taken for granted in everyday life – constitute a deeper and therefore more important psychological level. These have received much less attention in the scientific literature; this is the level of acculturation and enculturation examined in the present article. It is a level that is highly pertinent to immigrant school success, although one that is rarely considered.

Theoretical framework

It is important to specify the connection between sociodemographic factors and cultural values. What happens to socialization values under different sociodemographic conditions? Greenfield (2009) provides some answers. Her theory starts with the concept that cultural values are adaptations to varying sociodemographic conditions. These conditions are organized into two ideal types, *Gemeinschaft* (community

and *Gesellschaft* (society). The former is at the extreme a poor, rural, small-scale, and low technology environment, with larger families and education mainly at home, whereas the latter is at the extreme an urbanized large-scale, high tech environment, with smaller families and education mainly at school. Home and family are more important loci of socialization and education in *Gemeinschaft* conditions; in contrast, school is more important in *Gesellschaft* conditions, given the more impersonal demands of everyday life in a technologically oriented society (Greenfield, 2009). One important characteristic of a *Gesellschaft* society is that it is complex, with more *Gemeinschaft* social environments nested within it. These environments include working-class neighborhoods and immigrant enclaves – such as the Latino immigrant community in Los Angeles that was the central focus of the present study.

The use of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* as paradigms represents the patterning of sociodemographic variables to make a complete environment. In this respect, the Theory of Social Change and Human Development differs from the dominant paradigm in developmental psychology, which seeks to “disentangle” variables, such as culture or ethnicity and SES (Quintana et al., 2006). In contrast, the Theory of Social Change and Human Development seeks to identify relationships between SES and culture. It sees SES as an influence on cultural values, rather than seeing SES and cultural values as “independent” variables. Looking at these relationships the other way around, the theory posits that cultural values are adapted to (not independent of) sociodemographic conditions. In the light of this theoretical perspective, it is an empirical strength of the design of the present

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study to compare one group whose sociodemographics comprise the *Gemeinschaft* complex of variables with another group whose sociodemographics comprise the *Gesellschaft* complex (Greenfield, 2011). Moreover, the specification of the relationship between sociodemographics and cultural values within the domain of immigrant psychology and acculturation research constitutes an important contribution of the present study on the empirical level.

Most pertinent to the present study, familistic values are well adapted to *Gemeinschaft* environments, whereas individualistic values are well adapted to *Gesellschaft* environments. The earliest definition of familism (*familismo*) by Burgess, Locke, and Thomes (1963) includes two key components relevant to the present research:

- 1) The feeling on the part of all members that they belong pre-eminently to the family group and that all other persons are outsiders
- 2) Complete integration of individual activities for the achievement of family objectives.

The concept of familism can be contrasted with the very closely related concept of collectivism: the value system in which one gives priority to in-group goals over personal goals. The subtle difference is that collectivism includes not just family as an in-group, but other in-groups as well.

Henceforth in this article we will use the term “familism” when the family is the in-group, “collectivism” when other in-groups are involved in the situation.

Familism and collectivism contrast with individualism, a value system that prioritizes personal goals over the goals of the in-group (Schwartz, 1990; Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai, & Lucca, 1988). The present study demonstrates that Latino immigrant parents have more familistic values than European American parents or than their children's teachers. However, in the context of school achievement, where family values are not an issue, we find an absence of between-group value differences.

Sociodemographic environment and cultural values

Many Latino immigrant families immigrate from more *Gemeinschaft* to more *Gesellschaft* conditions (Greenfield, 2006; Reese, 2002). Although there is socioeconomic diversity in Mexico, immigration has been used selectively by individuals and families who are at the bottom of the opportunity ladder, that is, those who are the poorest and have the least opportunity. Our sample typifies this trend, with an average of five years of schooling in Mexico or Central America. According to criteria and data developed by the Mexican Association of Market Research and Public Opinion (2009), this level of schooling is a key element defining the lowest socioeconomic level, which has a number of additional *Gemeinschaft* characteristics: it is subsistence-based and family households are frequently multigenerational. Because of the *Gemeinschaft* conditions that typify the home country origins of our sample, we would expect familism to be strong. In addition, the high rate of extended family households in immigrant households promotes familism (Shields & Behrman, 2004). (Park, Joo, & Greenfield, in preparation; Shields & Behrman, 2004).

A body of research has established that, even equating social class, mothers in Mexico have traditionally had more familistic values than mothers in the United States (Holtzman, Diaz-Guerrero, & Swartz, 1975). This cross-national difference reflects the more *Gemeinschaft* characteristics of Mexico as a nation compared with the United States (Greenfield, 2009). However, even more significant, the lower SES group of mothers in the Mexican sample had significantly stronger familistic values than the middle-class Mexican sample.

These familistic and collectivistic values, brought from Mexico (Diaz-Guerrero & Salay, 1991) and Central America (Killen, Ardila-Rey, Barakkatz, & Wang, 2000), are rooted in the home settings of Latino

immigrant families in the United States (Desmond, & López Turley, 2009; Sabogal, Marin, Otero-Sabogal, Marin, & Perez-Stable, 1987). Individualistic values, in contrast, are intrinsic to school settings (i.e., grades are everywhere assigned to individuals rather than groups) and are particularly strong in U.S. schools (Greenfield, 2006; Greenfield, Quiroz, & Raeff, 2000; Raeff, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2000). Although Mexico as a country has been moving fairly rapidly in the *Gesellschaft* direction in recent years, over all, it is still a more *Gemeinschaft* environment than is the United States (Reese, 2002); and this difference is related to the background of Mexican immigrants in the U.S. The same general trends hold for El Salvador and Nicaragua and for immigrants from these countries, two other (minor) sources of our sample.

On the other hand, settlers and immigrants from Western Europe, especially Northern Europe, brought and maintained their long history of *Gesellschaft* values; Northern European immigrants and their descendants are therefore more likely to promote individualistic values in socialization than Latino immigrants. Our European American sample typifies the background that is adaptive in a *Gesellschaft* environment and the greater opportunity for formal education in a more *Gesellschaft* nation: completion of four years of postsecondary education was the average level of schooling for the European American mothers.

Institutions, like schools, in the United States are founded, implicitly, if not explicitly on the values of the mainstream Western European individualism (Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 1998). This situation subjects the children of Latino immigrants to discord between their home and their school socialization values (Valdés, 1996).

In a prior study, Raeff et al. (2000) found that, in the domain of personal relationships, Latino immigrant parents were significantly more likely to prioritize collectivistic or familistic socialization values than were European American parents or their children's teachers. That study utilized scenarios in a similar format to the ones used here, but relating to relationships rather than to achievement. Like the scenarios used here, each scenario presented a conflict situation experienced by Latino immigrant families; participants could construct open-ended resolutions to the conflicts that were collectivistic, individualistic, or had elements of both value systems. Although children in the two ethnic groups did not differ in their cultural values, parent–teacher differences suggested that children from Latino immigrant families were, nonetheless, being exposed to different and sometimes conflicting sets of cultural values in their homes and in their schools during socialization (Raeff et al., 2000). This type of cross-cultural value conflict between ancestral culture and the current social surround is a known source of stress in the migration process (Bhugra, 2005). European American parents, in contrast, did not differ significantly in their value orientation from their children's teachers. In contrast to the Latino children, European American children were receiving very similar value messages at home and at school.

Differences in values may be most salient in situations where family functioning versus individual achievement is in conflict or where individual achievement versus family unity is in conflict. The opportunity to measure the impact of situational variability was a strength of the method used in this study because our scenarios represented differing types of conflict and, in the Results section, are analyzed scenario by scenario.

Raeff et al. (2000) also found intergenerational differences. In some situations, Latino immigrant children did not respond in a significantly less collectivistic manner than Latino immigrant parents (sharing in the family, taking the initiative to prepare a family dinner when the child is not hungry). In other situations, children did respond in a significantly less collectivistic manner than Latino immigrant parents (helping a sick child at school). These findings suggest domain-specific patterns of second-generation acculturation to the host society: school situations show acculturation to mainstream individualism, but family situations do not. This pattern is

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