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The Identity Formation Process of Immigrant Children:
a Case Study Synthesis

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Abstract

Introduction: Children who immigrate often have difficulties in adjusting to their host country. A single case study based on similar narratives is composed to develop the character of a child's developmental cultural issues as he immigrated to the United States from El Salvador. Attachment theory is reviewed to discuss how detachment and re-attachment affected him. A review of the literature on assimilation and acculturation is also provided.

Objectives: The author synthesizes the work experience with the population with migration history to illustrate how attachment and loss impact these individuals, through a composed case study illustrated through the experience of Ramni, a boy who migrated to the United States from El Salvador.

Methods: A case study and narrative approach were used to analyze the clinical experience with this population. The composed narrative was from clients who were seen/ provided psychotherapeutic interventions for adjustment issues. Their age ranges from 10 to 24. The clients' primary country of origin was from the Latin America area.

Results: The findings show the child overaccommodated in adjusting to the United States culture, rejected his native culture and country, and had difficulties attaching to his biological parents. However, as a reconstructed self, he readjusted to incorporate his culture and native country. He also recontextualized the perspective he had on his family – to embrace a shared perspective of loss and gain.

Conclusions: The story of the child's development showed strong attachment to his grandparents and country of origin, thereby being uprooted from his native country and living with his biological parents necessitated adjustment to the United States culture and norms.

Keywords: attachment theory, attachment, acculturation, immigrant, assimilation

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I. Introduction

This is a case study synthesis based on my clinical experience with immigrant children and their parents. I synthesized over 10 years of clinical experience with this population in a single case study, and I composed the narrative about a Salvadoran child (Ramni, pseudonym). I trace and examine Ramni's experience as he immigrated to the United States at the age of 10, to be reunited with his nuclear/ origin family and discuss the clinical work with him at an approximate age of 16 and young adulthood.

I explore the influence of immigration on Ramni's identity formation. Although this paper does not explore an expanded conceptualization of attachment theory, attachment in the context of ecological systems, socio-cultural factors, language, rituals, and family traditions is conceptualized (Marotta, 2002). Attachment theory is reviewed to show how immigration shaped his identity, and ultimately, the acculturation and assimilation challenges that are inherent in immigration and identity formation. Through Ramni's story, clinical implications are made regarding how caregiving, bonding, and emigration affects the identity of a person. These implications might apply to social agencies, child protective services, parents, policy makers, and practitioners. Therefore, helping children of immigrants in remediating their situation is critical to their healthy ego development. It influences their level of acculturation, a sense of belonging, and self-efficacy (Cano et al., 2020; Ibañez, Kuperminc, Jurkovic, & Perilla, 2004; Neto, 2019; Yeh et al., 2005).

Literature review

Attachment theory and bonding – theoretical framework

Since the development of attachment theory and its application to emotionally disturbed children, researchers and practitioners have given definition to the concept of attachment and its associated problems. Bowlby (1969, 1988) conceptualized attachment as comprised of two basic components: security and insecurity. Ainsworth et al. (1978) expanded Bowlby's theory and devised an assessment to determine attachment patterns in children, the *Strange Situation Procedure*. This laboratory-based assessment classifies attachment into three patterns: secure, insecure-avoidant, and insecure-ambivalent/ resistant. Main and Solomon (1986) added another attachment pattern for infants who did not fit the previous categories, the disorganized/ disoriented attachment pattern. Secure attachment is based on the caregiver's response to the child's needs, whereas insecure attachment is based on the caregiver's lack of meeting the child's needs. Insecure/ avoidant attachment is based on the caregiver's detachment from the child, either emotionally or physically; that is, the child cannot rely on the caregiver and the child expects rejection. Insecure-ambivalent/ resistant attachment is based on the caregiver's permissive or neglectful interaction with the child. Disorganized/ disoriented attachment is the child's lack of consistent attachment model and randomly choosing attachment methods/ strategies to meet his or her needs.

Furthermore, there are four phases to the attachment behavioral system (Ainsworth, 1969; Pickover, 2002). The first phase is from birth to 3 months of age. During this phase, the caregiver is responsible for protecting and maintaining proximity to the child; the child responds to anyone in proximity through the orienting response system, activated by stimuli. The second phase is from 3 to 6 months of age. In this phase, the child becomes actively involved in interacting with the caregiver, that is, the child's preference is towards the mother (caregiver) rather than others (or any other stimuli). The third phase is between 6 and 9 months of age. During this phase, the child singles out a caregiver for attachment behaviors. This is where the child begins to explore and use the caregiver as a secure base to return to when necessary or needed. The fourth phase occurs around the 4th birthday. During this phase, the child gains an understanding of the factors that influence attachment. Thus, the child begins to change the caregiver's behavior through these factors to better match satisfying his or her needs.

According to attachment theory, every child goes through the phases of attachment and detachment during which they develop a greater sense of secure attachment or insecure attachment for the rest of their life (Coyl, Newland, & Freeman, 2010; Gazzillo, Dazzi, De Luca, Rodomonti, & Silberschatz, 2020; Grunebaum et al., 2010; Turney & Tanner, 2001). It is further hypothesized that the bond between a caregiver and a child is highly influential for the child in developing healthy emotional relationships (Coyl et al., 2010; Nishikawa, Hägglöf, & Sundbom, 2010). The attachment theory hypothesis is that "early relationship experience with the primary caregiver leads eventually to generalized expectations about the self, others, and the world [these expectations are the mental representations of the internal working models]" (Waters, Hamilton, & Weinfield, 2000, p. 678; Pickover, 2002; Sandler, 2003). Hence, the importance

of having a secure attachment is imperative since these attachment styles become internal working models, a prototype, for future adaptations (Atwool, 2006; Gazzillo et al., 2020; Woodward, Ferguson, & Belsky 2000). Moreover, a secure attachment style is even more relevant since attachment is part of the survival system activated when there is need to protect (Bowlby, 1988). Thus, the attachment model considers what is needed to develop a secure base and the consequences of insecure attachment, which becomes more difficult to restructure later on in life. Impairment in attachment results in a high likelihood that the child will progress through adolescence and into adulthood with poor relationship skills and other abnormal behaviors (Borelli, David, Crowley, & Mayes, 2010; Gormley & McNiel, 2010; Grunebaum et al., 2010; Madigan et al., 2006; McCarthy & Taylor, 1999). Conversely, secure attachment increases the likelihood that the developing individual will have a positive sense of self, effective coping skills, and adaptive interpersonal skills (Coyl et al., 2010).

Adult attachment

Adult attachment studies began in the early 1990s (Fraley, Niedenthal, Marks, Brumbaugh, & Vicary, 2006; Main & Solomon, 1986; Imamoğlu & Imamoğlu, 2007; Johnson, 2007; Sherry, Lyddon, & Henson, 2007; Westen, Nakash, Thomas, & Bradley, 2006). These studies have focused on the effects of attachment on marital relationships. Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) have been the predominant researchers applying attachment theory to adult attachment. They developed a four-category internal working model of the self: secure, preoccupied, dismissing, and fearful. The model has two juxtaposed dimensions, of positive and negative, based on self (self-worth) and perception of others (trustworthy and acceptance) (op. cit., 1991).

The secure type suggests that individuals have a sense of worthiness and trustworthiness of others, while the preoccupied type suggests that individuals have a sense of unworthiness and a sense of wanting to belong (by seeking and receiving acceptance from others). The fearful type suggests that individuals have a sense of unworthiness and untrustworthiness of others. Individuals who have this internal working model usually anticipate rejection and therefore avoid close relationships. The dismissing type suggests that individuals have a sense of worthiness, but untrustworthiness of others. Individuals with this internal working model usually avoid close relationships and protect themselves against vulnerability.

Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) model is helpful in understanding how a person might respond to injurious situations. According to Sable (2008), "the working models of adults are cognitive-affective structures that regulate the attachment system by monitoring and managing cognition, feelings and behavior in response to the attachment-related situations" (p. 24). Furthermore, the person's internal working models during the child attachment stages, as described by Bowlby, are affected (Oppenheimer, 2007; Sherry, Lyndon, & Henson, 2007). This is congruent with Sherry, Lyndon, and Henson's (2007) findings that "securely attached individuals are purported to reflect a generally positive view of self and others," whereas insecurely attached individuals become "more dysfunctional... less flexible and not as open to new information" (p. 344). Therefore, healthy attachment internal models are crucial to overcoming traumatic experiences and to increasing resilience (Grunebaum et al., 2010). However, acculturating or assimilating to a new environment can affect these internal working models.

Acculturation and assimilation

Acculturation and assimilation have been conceptualized and given meaning by many theorists. A consensus on which terms to use, however, does not exist. Some of the terms will be defined to ensure clarity, but they are not exclusive.

First, **acculturation** or **integration acculturation** is the process of a person adopting a new culture while keeping their old culture (Bornstein & Cote, 2010; Cara, 2010; Portes, Fernandez-Kelly, & Haller, 2009). The person embraces both identity of his home and host culture. There is no dissonance between the host and home culture at individual level. In addition, an indication of integration acculturation is the child being bilingual (Portes, Fernandez-Kelly, & Haller, 2009). Second, **consonant acculturation** is the process in which the parent and child seek to adopt the new culture and integrate values, mores, rituals, etc., into his or her sense of being (op. cit., 2009). In consonant acculturation, the parent and child together learn and accommodate to the host culture. There is no family conflict in the acculturation process. Finally, **dissonant acculturation** is the process in which the child minimizes the strength or importance of various aspects of one's original culture or moves toward rejecting and "letting go" of one's old culture (ibidem, 2009). The child attempts to become like those in the host country and seeks to minimize evidence of his or

her home country both internally and visibly. An indication of dissonant acculturation is the child not retaining the home language, and thereby he or she becomes monolingual, as opposed to bilingual. Dissonant acculturation has been the traditional definition of **assimilation**.

The decision to acculturate or assimilate varies. Immigrants tend to choose one or the other based on their experience in the host country and their identification with their home country (Cara, 2010). For some, especially children, it is less challenging to assimilate in order to minimize discrimination and potential rejection by members of the host country and immigrants who embrace the predominant culture. In Yeh et al.'s study (2005), they found that the responses to discriminatory acts or negative reactions accelerate the assimilation process for a child. However, this is not easily accomplished because the child has to master the cultural norms and language skills of the host culture in order to successfully represent him/ herself as a "legitimate" member of the dominant culture. The assimilation versus acculturation struggle is particularly crucial to children and youth given the centrality of culture to identity formation. Fortunately, the developmental fluidity of identity during late childhood, adolescence and young adulthood facilitates the assimilation process, in a sense making it easier than for adults. However, assimilation differences between child/ youth immigrants and adults within immigrant families set the stage for potential intergenerational conflict (Jurkovic et al., 2010). Furthermore, when children and their parents share assimilation goals, immigrant parents often function with limited ability to guide their offspring in the process. It is not uncommon for a child to take the lead and to essentially guide the willing parents in the assimilation process. The intergenerational conflict, however, often happens when parents are not accessible or able to guide the child. The gulf between acculturation and assimilation of the child and parent hinders the parent from teaching the child the native country cultural norms (Piedra & Enstrom, 2009; Yeh et al., 2005). Thus, the child possibly develops a dissonant acculturation, rejecting parents' culture while accepting mainstream culture, instead of a consonant acculturation, conjointly learning mainstream culture (Portes, Fernandez-Kelly, & Haller, 2009; Torres & Rollock, 2009; Yedidia, 2005).

Therefore, based on the literature, a preferential approach to social adaptation for immigrant children and adults is acculturation/ integration (Cara, 2010; Piedra & Enstrom, 2009), or, as stated by Portes

et al. (2009), consonant acculturation. Immigrant children experience "shifts in their self-identity" (Yeh et al., 2005, p. 178) and, without proper guidance, they have difficulty solidifying a secure self-construct. The child is constantly negotiating the two cultures in order to harmonize them. Therefore, as stated above, acculturation allows the individual to embrace both cultures without feeling the need to adjust from one culture to the other.

Traumatic object loss

Social identity theory help explains how one has the need for belonging and inclusion to a social group while maintaining an individual identity from these groups (Tajfel, 2010; Padilla & Perez, 2003; Stets & Burke, 2000). The individual forms a self-concept based on its membership in these social groups, and the individual's behavior is based on the relationship with these groups. However, immigrant children struggle with social inclusion and belonging.

Henry et al. (2005) proposed that immigrants go through loss and mourning. Loss and mourning seem appropriate concepts to describe the immigration experience, since the person loses many of his or her values, traditions, language and familiarity (Henry et al., 2005; Neto, 2019; Scopelliti & Tiberio, 2010). The typical use of labels such as *minority, alien,* and *immigrant* augment this loss. In addition, skin color, facial characteristics, speaking with an accent, and frequent inquisitive questions of the person's origin are constant reminders that he or she is an outsider (Wamwara-Mbugua & Cornwell, 2009). Thus, a person's identity and security are threatened, which could create a splitting defensive mechanism and a preoccupied or dismissing internal working model to protect self from vulnerability. According to Bornstein and Cote (2010): *"Immigration and acculturation are disorganizing individual experiences, entailing thoroughgoing changes of social identity and self-image. Immigrants must negotiate new cultures and learn to navigate different systems of speaking, listening, reading, and writing just to communicate effectively in their culture of settlement. Learning those systems requires gaining new knowledge, as well as adjusting responses of engrained life scripts to compensate for cultural differences, language use, and disruption of familiar family roles."* (p. 531).

The reorganization of the individual experiences is based on the person's identity formed/ modelled from their attachment perspective. Therefore, similar to the childhood attachment

processes, the adult seeks ways to interpret their situation based on the internal working model (Schore & Schore, 2008). More specifically, from object relations theory, these are introjects from the projective identification process (Waska, 2008). In Fraley et al.'s (2006) study of adult attachment and perception of emotional expressions, they found that highly anxious people tended to judge emotional expressions sooner than less anxious people did. This high sensitivity is an introject from childhood influencing the reaction unconsciously in the adult self. Hence, the automatic initial reaction a person has, which might be a self-critique of inadequacy, is important (Oppenheimer, 2007; Stefano & Oala, 2008). This reaction might be related to the reorganization of the new experience and the sense of loss of familiarity.

Thus, the interplay of object loss trauma appears as the person loses the childhood emotional bond from a secure base. As Sherry, Lyndon, and Henson (2007) found in their study, people who exhibit a preoccupied working model of attachment view themselves as inadequate to take care of themselves. An individual with a preoccupied working model may seek approval from others, but as an immigrant, this approval is never received. In Henry et al.'s (2005) study, they found that immigrants "may react negatively to the loss of their culture by denial of or clinging to the lost elements" (p. 110). This is where the internal conflict is created when the person tries to cling to lost elements and projective identification alters the ego in order to cope with this loss. However, since the working model is negative, the individual is not able to process effectively the loss of previous experiences and does not consider new experiences as valid. This is where the ego split occurs, and one could develop a preoccupied or dismissing internal working model.

Therefore, according to attachment theory, adult attachment is a reflection of child attachment (Westen, Nakash, Thomas, & Bradley, 2006). However, as an adult, the secure base has changed and the primary caregiver is no longer needed (Rovers, 2004). The person has created a secure attachment within other relationships. In other words, the person has generalized the attachment style he or she has acquired to others. Thus, "…there is no need for an emotional detachment from these lost objects; instead, losses can be assimilated into the mourner's experiences and maintain their emotional bond" (Henry et al., 2005, p. 111). Nevertheless, this requires the person to have or develop a secure attachment model and to have access to those object relations of his or her formative years.

II. Method

Case study synthesis

This study is a synthesis of over 10 years of clinical experience with children from Latin America, and the composed case study narrative traces and examines a Salvadoran child's experience as he immigrated to the United States at the age of 10 to be reunited with his nuclear family. The child experienced a confluence of challenges to his sense of self and to the integration of his personal domain with the transition to the United States and life with his biological parents. His parents came to the United States years before he joined them, leaving him with his maternal grandparents as primary care takers.

As a reference point, El Salvador is the smallest country in Central America, with a population of 6 million people (CIA World Factbook, 2017; Ignacio, 1989). Due to civil wars and family reunifications, El Salvador has a high number of Salvadoran nationals in the United States (Migration Policy Institute, 2017). The estimate is that there are 1.3 million Salvadorans living in the United States, with two states having the highest concentration: California (33%) and Texas (15%) (op. cit., 2017).

A child's story

Ramni enjoyed a secure and loving childhood with his maternal grandparents in El Salvador. However, at the age of 10, he was reunited with his biological parents in New York. To some, this would appear to be a fortunate reunion. As it will be discussed, Ramni's early rewards were minimal in the face of the traumatic loss in relation to his grandparents. In school, Ramni sought assimilation through powerful identification with White and Black students, turning away from his Spanish-speaking classmates. His sense of **fitting in** and belonging was being accomplished. There was dissonance between his own ethnicity and the identity toward which he was gravitating. This process can be viewed in the context of Ramni's attempt to pervasively transition from his secure base childhood, a childhood lost with his relocation to New York (change begets change). This can also be viewed as Ramni's way of accommodating the trauma inherent in his detachment from his loving grandparents as the primary caregivers.

Identity adaptation

In this section, Ramni's assimilation into the United States culture is discussed, the chaotic internal confusion during his adolescence, and efforts to forge a

highly acculturated sense of self as a young adult. Ramni's sense of self seems to go through the evolutionary process of four stages: 1) well-adjusted Salvadoran child, 2) assimilation to the U.S. culture, 3) adolescent identity confusion, and 4) reconstructed acculturated self as a young adult.

The approach to reconstruct Ramni's acculturated self stems from a constructivist perspective (Chiari, 2016). The meaning the person gives to their experiences influences the internal working models synergistically. Ramni compartmentalized his early childhood experiences to cope with his new experiences as they were not compatible. He could not give meaning to his early childhood experiences and new experiences. The change was drastic in that it did not give him enough time to adjust in an adaptive manner (even though it was not due to a forced exile); it set him into a crisis mode. His secure base was his grandmother and she was no longer available. He did not have a bond with his parents in his new environment, and they could not help him construct a meaningful event. Ramni constructed the move as traumatic, as opposed to opportunistic. Therefore, a dismissive internal working model and chaotic internal confusion make it nearly impossible for Ramni to appreciate the richness in his life tapestry.

Stage 1: Secure attachment. Ramni grew up with his maternal grandparents. His biological mother and father lived in the United States (they had moved to the U.S. for socioeconomic reasons; although, many individuals from El Salvador move to the U.S. due to violence and not merely for economic reasons). Ramni's secure base was with his grandparents and not with his parents. At the age of 10, his parents felt enough economically secure to move Ramni to the United States with them. Ramni somewhat expected this from his parents. His grandparents often mentioned to him that he and his siblings would go live with his parents. However, his grandparents did not anticipate the emotional bond Ramni had with them, and the expectation was not enough to prepare him to leave his grandparents. In addition, besides the emotional bond Ramni had with his grandparents, in El Salvador he was not considered a minority. In fact, he was part of the dominant culture. Hence, the uprooting from his nurturing grandparents and dominant culture marked him deeply, especially since the bond with his parents was not strong. The emotional detachment brought the loss and mourning of his native culture and identity. Ramni mourned (cried almost every night) over the loss and desired many times at the beginning to move back

with his grandparents. To Ramni, this mourning process lasted about a year; however, Ramni did not know during this time that he was mourning the loss of his grandparents. After Ramni saw that he was not moving back to El Salvador, he naturally began to assimilate the United States culture; he explored his environment and began to play. The assimilation process occurred as a protective mechanism from the loss of his native culture in the form of a dissonant acculturation.

Ramni experienced emotional, cultural and social shock when he moved to the United States. As said, the boy was not considered a minority in El Salvador. In fact, he was part of the dominant culture, and moving from his nurturing grandparents and dominant culture marked him deeply. The emotional detachment brought the loss and mourning of his native culture and identity. Moving with his parents was instant; it was a matter of getting on an airplane. It was not a slow process, and this shocked his system. It further shocked his system because the bond with his parents was not strong. Ramni only had vague memories of his father, without any positive emotional charge. These memories were as if his father was just another person. He had a slightly closer relationship with his mother. However, the bond with his mother was not strong enough to buffer the shock he experienced. Instead of reaching out to them, he emotionally distanced himself from them. For the first time, the family was becoming a family unit; it had existed only superficially as Ramni had lived during his early childhood with his grandparents. Furthermore, from Ramni's perspective at this time, he saw his parents only as providers without any emotional attachment. They rarely spent time with him as they were constantly working. Even when there were family outings and family vacations, it did not change Ramni's emotional closeness to his parents, as it will be discussed in the next section.

Stage 2: Assimilation. Assimilation has already been defined as dissonant acculturation. Ramni assimilated and rejected his own culture to deal with the loss of it and secure attachment. The choice to remove himself from his culture was related to the weak bond that existed between him and his parents. As Ramni acquired the language skills and norms of the new culture, he began to use them more often and decrease the use of his native culture. For example, Ramni began to speak English and decreased the use of his native tongue – Spanish. Consequently, Ramni befriended peers who were White or African American and distanced himself from Spanish speaking peers. Thus,

identity confusion ensued, as he learned that he was Latino and that his heritage could not be easily rejected.

Stage 3: Adolescent identity confusion/ identity deconstruction. As an adolescent, Ramni felt shame related to his native country, even though his childhood memories were positive. The dismissive internal working model interfered with relationships and social participation. He had a sense of worth, but a relentless untrustworthiness of others. This reality began to trigger questions of cause since he felt good about himself, but he could not trust others nor feel safe around them. This protection against vulnerability was taxing him emotionally and cognitively. Thus, he was forced to confront his compartmentalized reality. He had to deconstruct his identity from his native country to the host country. In other words, he realized that there was no shame to be an immigrant child and that rejecting his birth country only prevented him from being whole. He realized the importance of those experiences and how powerful they were in shaping his identity. Moreover, Ramni realized that the decision to assimilate was automatic, an unconscious process to cope with his loss. He began to understand that, in order to increase his well-being, restore his secure attachment, and process the shocking experience of moving to another country and losing his mother figure, he needed to have a reconstructed acculturated self. In addition, the realization of how assimilation created internal confusion and an uneven valence to his relationships was another motivating factor to deconstruct his identity. He could no longer deny his childhood history in El Salvador. He had to accept his past and create a balance in the present identity.

This process became the deconstruction of his identity to clear the confusion. Ramni had to realize that, even though he had been Americanized, he had a part that was Salvadoran. The acceptance of his Salvadoran heritage self-bridged the gulf that existed and solidified his identity.

Stage 4: The reconstructed acculturated self. The reconstructed acculturated self for Ramni is the solidarity between his native and host country. In realizing and accepting his Salvadoran identity, he began to integrate with his new Americanized identity. The tasks for the realization were accepting his old culture and integrating it with his new culture. For example, language played a key role in solidifying his identity. He had to intentionally speak both languages and not just English. He also had to be more amiable toward Spanish speaking individuals instead of rejecting them. Thus, he began to identify himself with Spanish

speaking individuals and to increase his Latino secure base. This allowed Ramni to feel less ashamed of his Salvadoran culture and to become proud of the unique cultural experience he had as a child. His shame originated from peers and others mocking him for his lack of language competency and for coming from a poor country. He also perceived that others treated him differently because he was foreign born. (This is probably when the dismissing internal working model began to emerge). However, Ramni realized that by not accepting his Salvadoran culture he was inadvertently rejecting the powerful emotional bond he had with his grandparents and was therefore continuing to mourn over the loss. This required a reconstruction of meaning in his life experiences, as both the experiences he had in El Salvador and the United States were part of his social cultural development.

In addition, he recontextualized his parents' efforts in trying to provide a better life for him. Initially, Ramni blamed his parents for forcing him to leave his grandparents. However, he came to realize that his parents were exceptional in the manner in which they secured a safe environment for him in the United States. For example, Ramni did not enter the country illegally, nor came into a situation where his parents could not provide for his basic needs. His parents were employed and had an income to support the family. The recontextualization of his parents' provisions also made him realize that he was not the only one who suffered through this process. He realized that the decision of his parents to leave him with his grandparents might have been difficult for them as well. (This is when Ramni began to empathize with his parents' experience). Moreover, Ramni's father entered the U.S. illegally, which means he had to deal with the immigration system by himself. Ramni's father ensured that his family had the necessary provisions (legal status, financial stability, and a home) before he considered bringing them to live with him. This decision was deliberate and purposeful. He also realized that his grandparents suffered from the separation. (His empathy was generalized to his grandparents as well. The traumatic [shock] experience began to shift from a maladaptive form to an adaptive form). Thus, the suffering was no longer exclusive, but instead it was shared. This made him even more appreciative of his family. Therefore, Ramni's recontextualization is the development of empathy maturation, which helped him have greater identification with his old culture.

This recontextualization did not change the dismissing internal working model automatically. It

only resolved the traumatic response towards his grandparents and parents. After resolving his family trauma, he began to expand this understanding to his social environment, an ecological perspective to the role society played in his adjustment. For example, Ramni realized that the rejection experiences from other children were not unusual, as children reject others based on preferences. This is normal child development. However, the cultural shift Ramni experienced, from belonging to a majority in El Salvador to a minority in the United States, resulted in integrating these rejections to his system as rejections of his identity. Also, when Ramni experienced that others perceived him as being different, again, he recognized that this was part of basic human curiosity, not a true rejection of his identity. It was after incorporating this understanding that he reconstructed his traumatic experience to account for his ecological experiences.

III. Discussion and conclusion

Children who immigrate to a host country do not have self-determination in the process. This influences their interpretation of the experience, which can be traumatic. As in Ramni's case, as a child he did not have consciousness of the social structures and dynamics that precipitated his parents' decision to move to the United States. He felt safe and secure with his grandparents. However, moving to the United States was a shocking experience; he no longer felt safe and secure. He had to work through reconstructing his identity, especially because of the age at which he moved; he was 10 years old, and developmentally starting to work through his sense of self in this world. This made his previous world experiences and current world experiences vastly different and incompatible. His new world did not have the familiar ecological systems such as socio-cultural factors, language, rituals, and family traditions to help him work through a solidified sense of self. This only fragmented his identity and created internal confusion and chaos. A proper reconstruction of the self was necessary, which implied that he had to accept his earlier experiences as parts of the self and allow the new experiences to influence the current self in concerted manner. This reconstruction held both experiences as valid and equally important, as opposed to rejecting earlier experiences.

Therefore, the goal of the therapist with a client who might have similar experiences as Ramni's story is to help an individual reconstruct a cohesive self. This requires a therapist to be attuned, not just clinically, but ethnically and linguistically as well. In order for a therapist to do effective work with an immigrant client, being able to connect at the cultural and ethnic level is important (Paris, Añez, Bedregal, Andrés-Hyman, & Davidson, 2005). Being bilingual is also another factor for understanding a child who has not mastered the dominant language and for gathering information from the parent. Additionally, language competence implies that the therapist is able to pick up on the nuances of the language and understand beyond the accent as well.

Finally, an important issue that is part of the narrative many children of immigrants experience, especially those with illegal status, is the fear of deportation. Many undocumented immigrants fear anyone who represents the government. Therapists are often perceived as part of the government or authority figures. This carries powerful implications. The therapist has to work through those defenses that are automatically raised because of immigration status. Children often fear that they will not see their parents. Earning the child's and parent's trust is critical. Moreover, children often have parents who have been deported and because of their parents' deportation, they develop mental health problems (e.g., separation anxiety, night terrors, and grief), and they begin to distrust anyone with authority. Therefore, attachment from an ecological system encompasses the realities of how the social environment affects a family's well-being. Therapists, policymakers, educators, and other allied professionals are encouraged to pay attention to these issues.

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Appendix: Terminology

Assimilation: The sole identification with the culture of the host society. Parent(s) and offspring may assimilate the host culture compatibly or incompatibly. According to Portes, Fernandez-Kelly, & Haller (2009), "*Consonant acculturation* is where the parents and children jointly learn and accommodate to the language and culture of the host society. [...] *Dissonant acculturation* is where [a child's] introjection of the values and language of the host society is accompanied by rejection of those brought by and associated with their parents. To the extent the parents remain foreign language monolinguals, dissonant acculturation leads to rupture of family communications, as children reject the use of a non-English language and, more importantly, reject parental ways that they have come to regard as inferior and even embarrassing" (p. 1081-1082).

Acculturation: The retention or reclamation of one's native culture along with the integration of the host culture. Bornstein & Cote (2010) provide a sociological definition of acculturation, as follows: the dual processes of cultural and psychological change that take place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members.

Integration: Identification and involvement with one's traditional ethnic culture, as well as that of the host country society (Cara, 2010).

Separation: Entails an exclusive involvement in one's traditional cultural values and norms coupled with little or no interaction with the members and culture of the larger society (Cara, 2010).

Marginalization: A rejection and or lack of involvement in one's traditional culture as well as that of the larger society (Cara, 2010).

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