

IMMIGRATION AND FAMILY SEPARATION

**LIVED EXPERIENCES:
IMMIGRATION, FAMILY SEPARATION, AND RESILIENCE**
A DISSERTATION

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines the psychological and familial impacts of immigration-related family separation on Latinx youth, focusing on attachment disruptions, identity formation, and acculturation challenges. The study included 10 Latinx college students (9 Female, 1 Male) enrolled at William Paterson University who experienced separation, either due to piecemeal migration or the deportation of a parent. Utilizing consensual qualitative research methods, six key domains emerged: (1.) family reorganization during separation; (2.) family reorganization upon reunification; (3.) ambiguous loss; (4.) culture, identity, and belonging; (5.) impact and perception of immigration policy; and (6.) informing intervention. Findings indicate that parental absence disrupts attachment bonds, leading to emotional fragmentation and ambivalence during reunification. Participants reported challenges in re-establishing trust and rebuilding familial relationships, underscoring the enduring burden of disrupted attachment security. Ambiguous loss was also pervasive, marked by the grief of cultural familiarities and absent kinship caregivers. Additionally, negotiating cultural identity revealed bicultural stress, as participants balanced their heritage with U.S. acculturation pressures. These results underscore the need for trauma-informed, culturally responsive interventions that address the complex interplay of attachment, identity, and cultural belonging.

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Latinx Families, Immigration Policy and Family Separation

In the United States, the Latinx population is the largest and fastest-growing ethnic minority group, a demographic shift with significant implications for immigration policy and mental health care (Pew Research Center, 2024). Despite Latinx immigrants' substantial contributions to American society, they face increasing political polarization around immigration, marked by anti-immigration sentiment that often targets racial minorities. Public discourse often depicts immigrants as economic or security threats, fueling systemic barriers and social stigmatization for Latinx families (Gonzalez-Barrera & Lopez, 2020). The integration of Latinx immigrants into American social structures frequently exposes them to entrenched stereotypes, discrimination, and multifaceted oppression across dimensions of race, religion, and gender. Immigration status adds another layer of vulnerability, as policies criminalize their presence and subject them to structural violence, perpetuated by societal attitudes and institutional practices that stigmatize immigrant identities (Menjívar & Abrego, 2012; Gonzales et al., 2013). The separation of Latinx families by U.S. immigration enforcement policies has been an ongoing issue, gaining greater visibility with Trump's zero-tolerance policy, which intensified family separations (Baker & McKinney Timm, 2020). These policies have amplified racial biases within institutional practices, disproportionately affecting Latinx families and embedding a sense of vulnerability within immigrant communities (Rosado et al., 2020; Morales, 2018). In this socio-political climate, Latinx youth are increasingly vulnerable to psychological distress as they navigate both personal and cultural disruptions due to family separation. Punitive U.S. immigration policies not only increase the risk of family separation but also exacerbate socio-economic and psychological vulnerabilities within Latinx communities. Immigration-related sanctions create legal barriers to family unity, limit access to employment and healthcare,

and contribute to socio-economic hardship, generating a pervasive sense of hypervigilance and fear among immigrant families (Vargas et al., 2017; Ayón, 2018).

Family separation in the context of immigration is common; approximately 85% of immigrant children experience separation from one or both parents during migration (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2002; Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2023). Under restrictive immigration policies, many families are left without legal pathways to reunification, leading to unauthorized migration or deportations that fragment family units (Perreira & Pedroza, 2019). Piecemeal migration, in which parents migrate to the host country first to establish financial stability, often results in children remaining in their country of origin with extended family, awaiting eventual reunification (DeWaard et al., 2018).

In response to these challenges, the current study aims to fill critical gaps in understanding how family separation impacts the mental health, attachment relationships, and identity formation of Latinx youth. While existing studies address broad systemic barriers, more focused research is needed on the nuanced psychological impacts of prolonged parent-child separation in Latinx communities.

An Integrative Conceptual Framework of Family Separation and Reunification

Attachment and Family Systems Theories. Attachment and family systems theories can be used together to understand how family relationships develop and the effects of family separations. Attachment theory focuses on the emotional bond between children and their primary caregivers in their early experiences and how this bond shapes their expectations for future relationships. Family systems theory gives a broader context for how dyadic relationships, like those between children and their caregivers (e.g., their mother), exist within the larger family system.

According to attachment theory, early separations between children and their primary caregivers can damage the caregiver-child bond (i.e., attachment) and influence how the child views social interactions throughout their lives. Therefore, it is believed that a youth's ability to build attachment security with a parent—that is, the internalized belief that one is deserving of love and that others are trustworthy caregivers—is threatened when a parent migrates and leaves the child in the care of another (Venta et al., 2021).

The impact of immigration-related family separation is deeply intertwined with family dynamics and cultural context. Family systems theory underscores the interdependence within family units, with shifts in roles, resources, and coping strategies affecting family organization throughout the migration process (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013). These shifts are particularly pronounced in Latinx families, where *familismo*—a cultural value emphasizing loyalty, interdependence, and extended kinship ties—provides a source of resilience, helping families navigate separation trauma (Ayón, Marsiglia & Bermudez-Parsai, 2010). Familismo is expected to moderate the emotional toll of family separations, highlighting both the strengths and challenges in these dynamics.

During reunification, family dynamics undergo additional reorganization, often causing disruption as youth experience ambivalent feelings in reconnecting with previously absent caregivers. Attachment theory highlights how separation disrupts secure attachments, leading to relational insecurity that may persist through the reunification process. Youth may struggle with the loss of kinship caregivers who provided stability during parental absence, while simultaneously grappling with the challenges of re-establishing bonds with their biological parents (Lu et al., 2020; Ainsworth, 1989). This period of reorganization can produce

attachment-related insecurities, as youth reconcile complex feelings of loyalty, resentment, and unfamiliarity within the parent-child relationship.

Ambiguous Loss. Related to attachment and family systems theory is the concept of ambiguous loss proposed by Boss (1999). It describes the ambiguity or uncertainty that immigrant families often experience when they become separated from salient attachment figures, whether due to transnational migration or forced separation in the form of deportation. Boss (2016) posits that an ambiguous loss is one that remains unclear, incomplete, or impartial. More specifically, a family member may be physically absent, but psychologically present or conversely. Applied in the context of immigration and family separation, loved ones and cultural familiarities may be left behind but remain present in the psyche of the individual (Boss, 2016). However, at the same time, acculturative stressors may leave some family members emotionally distant or unavailable. The challenge is that in juxtaposition to experiences of loss, such as the death of a family member, family separation is a much less clearly defined event of loss (Solheim & Ballard, 2016). As a result, youth who experience a loss due to the separation of salient familial attachments often go unrecognized and disenfranchised (Lovato, 2019).

This conceptual lens also highlights the unique and complex realities of relationships in transnational immigrant Latinx families. More specifically, ambiguous loss has been characterized by carrying a heavy emotional burden, boundary ambiguity, and significant stress (Boss, 2016). Irrespective of the context in which it occurs, whether due to piecemeal migration or deportation, separation from a parent has been found to result in worry, suffering, and grief (Solheim et al., 2022). While families often plan for separation to be temporary, increasingly punitive immigration policies and enforcement practices lead to uncertainty regarding the length of separation, the possibility of reunification, and the future of the family (Solheim et al., 2022).

Given the ambiguity, youth who endure these changes to their family systems, struggle with how to move forward resulting in significant boundary ambiguity (Falicov, 2005).

Intergenerational Cultural Dissonance (ICD)

The process of acculturation upon reunification adds another layer of reorganization for Latinx families. While Latinx families are often grounded in collectivistic values such as families, they face a cultural clash with the individualistic values of U.S. society, which emphasize autonomy and self-direction (Perreira & Ornelas, 2022). This divergence can lead to intergenerational cultural dissonance (ICD)—a clash over salient cultural values and norms between parents and children. Unlike typical family conflict, ICD involves deeply rooted cultural differences that intensify as immigrant youth adapt more rapidly to U.S. culture than their parents, widening the acculturation gap and heightening family tensions (Choi et al., 2008; Zayas & Heffron, 2023; Garcia Coll & Marks, 2022).

ICD presents a critical challenge for Latinx youth navigating between their heritage and the demands of American society. Youth may experience a sense of “in-betweenness” or cultural liminality, where they struggle to balance their cultural identities, risking feelings of isolation or identity conflict. According to Choi, He & Harachi (2008) this acculturative dissonance may cause problem behaviors directly or indirectly by, for instance, upsetting family processes, which increases conflict within the family system and erodes parent-child attachments.

Barriers, Stigma, and Culturally Relevant Care

The combined effects of disrupted attachment, cultural identity challenges, and systemic barriers present significant obstacles to mental health care access for the Latinx community. Structural barriers such as financial constraints, lack of insurance, and limited availability of culturally and linguistically diverse providers hinder service utilization (Alegría et al., 2017).

Additionally, many Latinx individuals conceptualize mental health concerns as somatic or physical issues and may be unaware of the availability of psychological treatment options (Cabassa, Zayas, & Hansen, 2006).

Mental health stigma further discourages help-seeking behaviors, as cultural beliefs often frame psychological issues as personal weaknesses or character flaws. Even when Latinx individuals do seek care, they frequently encounter providers who are culturally misattuned, leading to experiences of not feeling seen or understood (Ayon et al., 2018). This lack of culturally relevant care can result in misdiagnoses or ineffective treatment, perpetuating underutilization of mental health services within the Latinx community (Morales, 2018). The findings underscore the importance of addressing stigma, enhancing culturally competent care, and fostering supportive networks to improve mental health outcomes in Latinx communities.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine the mental health, family dynamics, and identity formation of Latinx youth affected by immigration-related family separation and reunification. Through an in-depth exploration of these experiences, this study seeks to elucidate the psychological challenges, attachment disruptions, and identity conflicts Latinx youth face as they navigate migration, acculturation, and family reconfiguration. Additionally, this study aims to highlight systemic barriers that impact access to culturally responsive mental health care for this population.

This research is grounded in an empowerment value orientation, this study amplifies the voices of historically marginalized individuals by situating their narratives within a conceptual framework of family separation and reunification that integrates attachment, family systems, ambiguous loss and intercultural dissonance theories. By bridging theoretical perspectives with

lived experiences, the study seeks to inform culturally competent mental health practices and enhance support systems for Latinx immigrants.

Research Questions:

1. How do Latinx youth experience and cope with the psychological and emotional impacts of family separation and reunification, particularly in terms of attachment and family relationships?
2. In what ways do separation and reunification influence Latinx youth's sense of cultural identity, belonging, and acculturation with the U.S.?
3. How do Latinx immigrant families perceive and engage with mental health care, and what gaps exist in meeting their unique needs?

Significance of the Study

This study offers critical insights into the mental health challenges Latinx immigrant families face with the goal of contributing to the development of more culturally responsive interventions. By examining the nuanced effects of family separation, the research aims to shed light on attachment disruptions, acculturation challenges, and the psychological toll of migration on Latinx youth. The findings are expected to underscore the need for integrated, culturally attuned care that acknowledges both the strengths and vulnerabilities within Latinx families.

Anticipated Findings

This study anticipates that family separation and reunification will contribute to significant emotional distress, including symptoms of depression, anxiety, attachment insecurities, and experiences of ambiguous loss among Latinx youth. Ambiguous loss, resulting from the prolonged absence of a parent, may lead to unresolved grief and a sense of psychological disconnection. Reunification is expected to add further attachment challenges,

prompting a reorganization of family roles as youth experience ambivalence in re-establishing bonds with previously absent caregivers. This process may intensify attachment-related insecurities as youth struggle to reconcile longing, resentment, and unfamiliarity within the parent-child relationship.

In addition to attachment disruptions, youth are expected to face substantial cultural identity and acculturation challenges. The process of balancing heritage values with the pressures of assimilating into mainstream U.S. culture may result in cultural dissonance, a sense of “in-betweenness,” and difficulties in identity integration. This cultural liminality could contribute to feelings of isolation and identity conflict as youth attempt to honor their cultural roots while adapting to the norms and expectations of their new environment.

This study also anticipates that Latinx families will encounter barriers to accessing mental health care, including financial, linguistic, and cultural challenges, with stigma around mental health further limiting utilization. Despite these challenges, familismo is anticipated to provide a protective layer, offering resilience through extended kinship support during parental absence. However, the findings are likely to emphasize a critical need for trauma-responsive, culturally informed interventions that address ambiguous loss, attachment disruptions, and acculturation challenges, all within the socio-political contexts that shape the experiences of Latinx families.

Method

Participants

Participants were 10 Latinx students between the ages of 20 and 34 years old (nine female participants, and one male). The sample included two participants each of Salvadoran, Ecuadorian, Brazilian, and Peruvian descent, one participant from Mexico and another from the

Dominican Republic. The age range and college student sample align with the study's focus on young adults who have navigated family separation and reunification in their formative years. This demographic is particularly informative, as their experiences capture the long-term impacts of family separation during a critical developmental stage. Six of the 10 participants experienced family separation due to piecemeal migration, with either one or both parents, having emigrated to the United States, leaving the participant behind in their home country, before reunification in the United States. Four of the 10 participants experienced forced family separation due to the deportation of a parent.

Interview Protocol

A semi-structured interview was empirically and rationally derived, drawing upon previous research and modified for the current study. The protocol was pilot-tested with a 23-year-old first-generation Latina-American participant to examine the protocol's content validity. Questions on the interview protocol (see Appendix B) explored the participants' involvement in the migration decision, experiences of family reorganization, identity, and feelings of belonging, as well as their engagement and perception of the mental healthcare system (see Appendix B for the full protocol). All participants, except one, were bilingual (Spanish or Portuguese and English), and all interviews were conducted in English.

Procedure

Recruitment. Participants were recruited from William Paterson University (WPU) through the University-wide Sona System. In addition, examiners also promoted the research opportunity to the departments of Latin American and Latinx Studies, the Center of Latinidad, WPUNJ Latinx and Multicultural Fraternities and Sororities, as well as via the WPU Latinx Psychology Course. Members of the research team posted flyers on the WPU campus that

described the study and provided brief presentations to the aforementioned classes about the project's aims.

For inclusion in the study, it was required that participants self-identify as Hispanic or Latinx, be 18 years or older, and endorse having experienced either voluntary or forced immigration-related family separation before the age of 21. As an incentive, participants received a \$20 digital Amazon gift card following participation. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at William Paterson University, with the IRB approval number 2024-301.

Interview Procedures. Participants were provided with detailed information about the study's aims, procedures, potential risks, and benefits before giving their consent. They were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Interviews were conducted through virtual, individual, semi-structured interviews, running from forty-five minutes to an hour, via a HIPAA-compliant Zoom meeting. Identifying information and legal status were not obtained to ensure participants' privacy and confidentiality of information. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by Sonix, an automated service. All transcripts were reviewed for accuracy against the audio recording. Upon completing the review of the transcript, all audio files were deleted from the cloud drive, in which they were saved, as per the WPU IRB guidelines.

Data Analysis. The guiding method for this qualitative exploration was the Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) approach which allows for the study of inner experiences, attitudes, and beliefs (Hill & Knox, 2021). Hill and Knox (2021) describe that CQR acknowledges that all lived experiences are unique, dynamic, and socially constructed. As such, CQR seeks to embrace and shed light on these distinct experiences while also searching for potential commonalities, or

themes, across individuals, lived experiences (Hill & Knox, 2021). Because immigration is such a complex and often emotionally charged phenomenon with evolving and long-lasting implications, CQR is particularly useful as it has been established to explore emotionally laden inner events (Hill & Knox, 2021).

A core assumption of the CQR method is that complex, emotionally laden, and meaningful personal experiences involve multiple perspectives and levels of awareness (Hill & Knox, 2021). In this regard, central to CQR is the process of seeking consensus among researchers to limit potential biases and facilitate “truth” finding in the data (Hill & Knox, 2021). Practically, this occurred through a series of steps. First, research team members were assigned to examine the data independently, assigning domains and themes (i.e., identifying constructs, ideas, and meanings that characterize the experiences and perceptions of the participants). Subsequently, members of the research team collaboratively shared findings, perspectives, and opinions, to facilitate discourse about differential themes. Through this process, the complexity, idiosyncrasies, and nuances of each case and how they overlap were discussed in an effort to reach a consensus regarding themes and core findings.

Validation Strategies. To ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of the findings, multiple validation strategies were used. Researcher reflexivity was maintained by having team members engage in reflexive discussions, allowing them to discuss their thoughts, reactions, and potential biases. This reflexive approach promoted awareness of how researcher’s backgrounds might influence data interpretation, contributing to a more objective analysis. Triangulation was applied in multiple forms to strengthen credibility, involving multiple team members in coding and analysis, minimizing the influence of any single researcher’s perspective. The data source triangulation included participants from diverse Latinx backgrounds and migration experiences,

ensuring the findings reflected a broad range of perspectives within the Latinx community. The consensus-based coding approach further enhanced reliability. Team members initially coded the data independently and then came together to reconcile discrepancies, ensuring that the final domains and codes represented a balanced view. Additionally, the credibility of our findings is supported by rich quotes from our participants that are used to illustrate categories within each domain.

Results

The data analysis revealed six primary domains that capture the experience of Latinx youth affected by family separation and reunification: (1) Family Reorganization During Separation, (2) Family Reorganization Following Reunification, (3) Culture, Identity, and Belonging, (4) Ambiguous Loss, (5) Impact and Perceptions of Immigration Policy, and (6) Informing Intervention. Each domain was subdivided into categories that reflect common themes within participants' narratives, and structured with representative quotes, allowing participants' voices to underscore the themes that emerged. Frequency labels were used to describe how representative each category was for the sample. See Table 4 for the complete list of domains, categories, and frequencies.

General describes themes represented in all or all but one case.

Typical describes themes that occurred in between half and less than all cases.

Variant represents themes occurring in less than half but more than two cases.

Rare describes themes that were only present in two or fewer cases.

Domain: Family Reorganization During Separation

Four categories emerged for the family reorganization during separation domain: fragmented parent-child relationship (general), feelings of loss, nostalgia, and longing for

reunification (typical), resilient bonds with kinship caregivers (typical), and relationship strain between child and parent who remains (variant). Within this domain, participants articulated diverse experiences that underscore the profound impact of migration-induced separations.

Category: *Fragmented parent-child relationship.* In this general category, all participants expressed a notable fragmentation in their relationship with the migrating parent(s). Participants revealed complexities within the parent-child bond where parental absence is not solely physical but manifests as a pervasive emotional distance. For instance, an Ecuadorian female, separated from her mother at two-months-old, stated,

Growing up without my mom was very difficult. I could never, to this day, trust her, especially with personal and private things. It's just that she was never there for me. She was never there to hug me and hold me. I love her and I forgave her, but it was hard to understand.

Participants also attributed blame and anger towards parents for external adversities, including the loss of family members and sexual violence. A Peruvian female participant described her anger, stating,

I was sexually assaulted twice. I hated my mom for it. I was angrier at my mom than I was at the person who hurt me. I needed her. I needed someone to be there for me and she was the only one who could do that. There was someone taking advantage of me, and my mom just wasn't there.

Maintaining connections over geographical distances poses challenges, with participants navigating periods of emotional distances and attempts at reconnection. A Salvadorian male, separated from both his parents at seven months old, expressed,

I didn't have many interactions with my mom throughout my childhood. She was in the States working and as much as she provided for us financially, she became a stranger to me. I always knew she was my mom, and she was the reason I went to a good school and had the best toys, but I didn't know her.

Category: *Feelings of loss, nostalgia, and longing for reunification.* In this typical category, participants frequently reported feelings of profound loss and nostalgia, particularly in the absence of maternal figures. A Peruvian participant, who experienced the deportation of her father, and later her mother's return to their country of origin, stated,

I don't know how to describe it, but I think it feels like love and pain go hand in hand... There's an emptiness or sense of things not having any meaning. It gets better, but it doesn't go away. When I go back to see my mother... having to say goodbye starts that cycle of pain all over again.

Episodes of periodic reunions sometimes alleviate feelings of longing but also reignite the ache of separation. A female participant of Dominican descent described her longing, stating,

When my mother left, I felt like a piece of me was gone. We were inseparable. It was hard to stay behind without her. She made a promise to me that it wouldn't be long and that she would do everything she could to bring me back to her in the U.S. I spent all my time thinking about how things would be when I got to go to the U.S. to be with her. There was always this hope that soon we'd be back together.

These accounts underscore emotions entwined in family separation—loneliness, guilt, and a profound sense of emptiness. A participant of Ecuadorian descent shared,

The pain as a little girl of not having my mom with me is something I still feel today. I would see my friends with their moms, their moms taking them to school, spending time together on weekends, cooking together, whatever it was. Even though I had my grandma, and she played the role of a mother figure...I wanted my mom with me.

Category: *Resilient bonds with kinship caregivers.* In this typical category, participants discussed the profound bonds that they established, particularly with grandmothers, who assumed significant maternal roles in the absence of migrating parents. A participant of Ecuadorian descent, who expressed,

I wouldn't be who I am today without my grandma...When she found out that we would be leaving to come be with our parents, she slowly started separating herself from my brother and me. She said she knew no other way to deal with the loss she was feeling. Me and my brother were her babies and she lost us almost overnight. She tells me every day that I am not her granddaughter, I am her daughter. Those words mean everything to me.

While participants longed for reunification with their parents, leaving kinship caregivers elicited profound feelings of loss. The narratives reveal a delicate interplay between separation, the rebuilding of attachment bonds following ruptures, and the enduring impact of the resilient bonds they established.

Category: Relational strain between child and parent who remains. Although a variant theme, four participants described the relational strain they experienced with the parent who remained. Participants described instances of increased tension marked by resentment, loss of authority, and power struggles with the non-migrating parent. A participant of Mexican descent, whose father was suddenly deported, stated,

I don't know where all the anger came from. We blamed my mom for everything that was happening. Whatever happened, it was always her fault and our relationship really suffered because of that. It felt like choosing sides. My dad had been taken from us and so we pushed my mom away, too.

The stories highlight the clash between the expectations of parental guidance and the practical realities of families living with the burden of separation. Moreover, the emotional toll was not only prevalent for the youth experiencing separation, but also for the parents and spouses who become left behind. Following her father's deportation, a participant of Peruvian descent explained,

My mom was so busy working because she was on her own suddenly. The pressure of becoming a single parent made her angry, too. Instead of leaning on each other, I blamed her. I didn't see how hard it was on her... She didn't have the opportunity to grieve everything she was losing because she had to work and take care of us on her own... I can't imagine how hard that was for her.

Domain: Family Reorganization Following Reunification

The emergence of the domain, family reorganization following reunification, reveals the intricate process of familial reconstruction that unfolds as families navigate the complexities of reunification following prolonged periods of separation. Within this domain, five distinct

categories emerged: parent-child estrangement upon reunification (typical), longing for familiarity and kinship caregivers (typical), lingering resentment towards parents (typical), sudden and disruptive reunification (variant), and reconciliation and rebuilding of relationships (typical).

Category: *Parent-child estrangement upon reunification.* In this typical category, participants revealed a pervasive struggle to establish connections upon reunification, marked by a profound sense of emptiness and disconnection from parents. Many described initial encounters with their parents as akin to meeting strangers. Describing his experience of reunification, a Salvadorian participant stated,

When I came to this country and I saw my mom for the first time, I felt nothing. There was nothing there. I felt no connection to her. There were no emotions. It felt like my brother, and I were going off to live with strangers.

Instances of rebellion and anger, such as hiding and refusing to acknowledge parents, underlie the depth of the estrangement. The narratives also highlight the complexities of adjusting to new parental roles, with participants grappling with issues such as calling their parents by their first names and resisting their roles as caregivers. A female participant of Ecuadorian descent described,

There were a lot of issues trying to establish who my parents were to me. My grandparents were my parental figures, not my mom and dad...I would call my grandma back home and beg her to come get me. I didn't want to be here with my parents...I would tell my grandma that I didn't know my mom. She wasn't my mom. I would yell and try to explain how unfair it felt. I wanted to go back home.

Category: *Longing for familiarity and kinship caregivers.* Revealed as a typical category, participants expressed a profound yearning for their homes, relationships, and cultural landscapes that were left behind in their home country. This longing was often accompanied by

homesickness and a reluctance to embrace new familial roles. A participant of Ecuadorian descent remarked,

It was hard. I would cry thinking about my grandma back home. I would cry at school. I would wake up crying and go to sleep crying... Imagine leaving your home, your family, your friends, the person you love most in the world, which for me, was my grandma. It felt impossible... I became angry.

Participants further explored the paradox of attempting to establish a sense of normalcy while simultaneously feeling the emotional toll of severed ties to their home country. Their stories reveal the multifaceted struggles, from psychological maladjustment to feelings of anger, displacement, and persistent sorrow.

Category: *Lingering resentment towards parents.* Emerging as a typical category, the theme of lingering resentment toward parents reveals participants' feelings of deep-seated anger and the enduring challenges of rebuilding a sense of trust with their parents. A participant of Ecuadorian descent described the insecurity she experienced upon reunifying with her family in the U.S. She reported,

When I was little, my family would tell me that my mom had left so she could build us a better future. As a little girl, I couldn't process that. To me, it felt like she left me. It felt like she and my dad abandoned me and that feeling didn't just go away when they came back for me.

Participants described channeling their pain into blame, attributing fault to the absent parent, even for broader family hardships and external adversities, such as the passing of a grandparent and an experience of sexual assault. Describing her experience of grief following the loss of her grandmother, a Salvadorian participant revealed,

I spent my entire childhood by my grandmother's side. She passed away the same day I was supposed to come to America with my mom. I felt angry after it happened. I turned all the pain into anger towards my mom. I believed that if my mom hasn't told my grandma that I was coming to the U.S., that I would be leaving her, that she would still be with us. She died of a broken heart.

Category: Sudden and disruptive reunification. A variant theme, participants who experienced a sudden reunification, described the emotional upheaval accompanying reunification after prolonged periods of separation. Participants recalled the day of their departure from their home country and reveal feelings of confusion and resistance as familial ties were abruptly altered. A participant of Dominican descent described,

I remember the day like it was yesterday. My stepdad and my grandma took me into the living room, and he told me, 'You're going to the U.S. to see your mom.' I was so confused. I didn't understand what he meant. I was sitting next to my mom. My grandma was my mom. I didn't want to go anywhere, I told him. It was all just so fast.

These narratives also highlight the ambivalence of having longed for reunification but having to depart from familiar surroundings and family members. A participant of Ecuadorian descent described her losses,

I was an honors student. I attended one of the best schools in the country and of course, I was only there because of my mother's sacrifice, because of the financial support from the U.S. She was paying for my education, but at the time, I didn't understand that. I just remember that when they told me I was moving to the U.S., I had just received recognition for being in the top of my class. I was going to be in a ceremony at school. I was picked to carry the Ecuadorian flag during the opening of the ceremony. I earned that and I was so proud. I left Ecuador for the U.S. on the day of the ceremony. I never got to participate. There were so many emotions. Of course, I wanted to come be with my mom, but it felt like I was leaving so much behind.

Category: Reconciliation and rebuilding of relationships. The theme of reconciliation and rebuilding of relationships emerged as a typical theme. Participants highlighted the transformative nature of the parent-child relationships, moving from a place of disconnection and resentment to attunement and reconnection. Participants revealed their desire to move beyond pain, forging a dialectical perspective that acknowledges the hardships they've endured as a result of separation, while also honoring their parents' decision to emigrate as a sacrifice in service of building brighter futures. The significance of time emerges, with the acknowledgment that life is finite, prompting a conscious effort to invest in rebuilding relationships. The narrative

of understanding unfolding with age echoes through the stories, as individuals grapple with the realities their parents faced—deportation, separation, loss, and a struggle for survival. This newfound comprehension becomes a bridge fostering closeness and resilient bonds between parents and children. A participant of Peruvian descent reflected on her experience. She stated,

I began to understand when I was older... My parents explained how hard it was on them and the toll that it took on them. They didn't have access to the right resources. They were just trying to survive. When you're so worried about your stability, there's no room to think about anything else. I love my parents. I'm sorry that I was so hard on them. I understand them more than they know.

Domain: Ambiguous Loss

The domain of Ambiguous Loss emerged through two distinct categories: the persistent feelings of grief and longing for a complete family (typical); and the unresolved emotions encircling the absence and its profound effect (typical). Within the domain of ambiguous loss, emotions remain suspended, treading a delicate line between presence and absence, forming a deep narrative of love, longing, and disruption, that extends across borders.

Category: Persistent feelings of grief and longing for a complete family. Within this typical category, nearly half of the participants described a sense of loneliness that permeates from being physically separated from primary attachment figures across borders. Participants revealed an emotional void, exemplified by daily reflections of absent loved ones and their profound longing for reconnection, the impact of years-long separations, the persistent hopes of reunification, and the missed family moments. A female participant whose father had been deported to Mexico shared her experience,

Right now, my biggest goal is to petition to have my dad back in the United States. It's what I work towards every day. I want him here with us. It's sad knowing that life is still going on and he's missing it. My brother had two amazing kids and my dad has never met them. We're graduating, going to college, and starting families. My dad is missing everything that's happening in our lives.

For those who have been able to make visits with family members across borders, there was a recounting of the psychological pain that accompanies the need to say goodbye upon departure. A participant of Peruvian descent described her visits back home,

My mom is my best friend, and we are closer than ever, thankfully. I talk to her at least twice a day and I text her constantly. I wish we could be closer. Sometimes I just want her hug. It's hard having her there and being here... It feels like I'm floating all alone in this country. I need my mom.

Category: Unresolved emotions surrounding the absence and its impact. Participants described the intricate dynamics of family separation, the daily yearning for connection, talking to an absent loved one through a photograph, illustrating the persistent void left by the distance, a pain that was revealed to pervade long after reunification. A participant of Peruvian descent, whose father was deported, and later reunified with the family, described,

It feels like I'm trying to make up for lost time with my dad. I'll never get those years back. It wasn't just the time that he was away, it was also the time I spent being angry with him and my mom. I'm doing my best to make up for all of it. It isn't easy. I regret a lot of the things that I did and how I treated them because of my anger. That's something that I have to carry with me forever.

Participants also recalled the lasting impact of parental absence during pivotal life moments, such as winning a beauty pageant or school graduation, that although long ago, continues to generate pain. A participant of Ecuadorian descent revealed,

I won a beauty pageant when I was seven years old... All I can remember is that when they announced my name as the winner, I just felt empty. I needed my mom there. I wanted her to see what I had accomplished. Those are things that stay with you. She missed a lot of my childhood. That's time you don't get back.

Domain: Culture, Identity, and Belonging

The domain of culture, identity, and belonging is highlighted through the lens of two categories: feeling responsible to validate parents' sacrifices (general) and cultural identity, displacement, isolation and not fully belonging (general). Participants revealed the delicate

balance between their cultural identity, individuality, and acculturation. They discussed the weighty sense of responsibility to honor their parents' sacrifices, the ache of perceived isolation from home, and the negotiation of cultural values and identity.

Category: *Feelings of responsibility to validate parents' sacrifices.* All participants expressed an internalized responsibility to honor their parents' sacrifices. They processed the expectations to excel academically and professionally, embodying the dreams their parents envisioned when immigrating to a new country. A female participant of Dominican descent explained,

I had to take a year and a half off from college. My grandma passed away and I wasn't doing well enough to manage expectations in school. When I took time off, I was so worried about how my family was going to perceive me. I felt like a loser that entire year. I just kept thinking about how important it was that I go back. The whole reason we came to this country was so I could get a better education and have a career. Meanwhile, here I was taking time off. I felt like I was disappointing everyone.

A participant of Brazilian descent, who experienced the sudden deportation of her father, further added,

My parents came to this country to give me a better future. I don't have the option to slack off because I know what that took from them. In some ways, it's made me stronger and more ambitious, but I also think that it has sort of broken me. I want so badly for things to be okay that I feel paralyzed sometimes. I can't make any decisions about my future. I don't know what I want to do and that's scary because I owe this to my family. I'm the first person in my family to go to college. I just don't want to throw any opportunities away. Sometimes I wish I could do all the things people my age do and just live my life and not think too much about things. Till this day, there are people back home who are trying to come here, and they do it illegally. They decide to come here even if it means facing dangerous situations and maybe not making it. I have to give it my best.

Category: *Cultural identity, displacement, isolation, and not fully belonging.* Nearly all of the participants shared a collective sentiment of straddling two worlds—the American culture and their country of origin—yet never feeling rooted in either. They recounted tales of isolation,

cultural clashes, and the ever-evolving negotiation of identity. A female participant of Dominican descent expressed,

I've lived my entire adult life in the United States. There are times when I don't feel like I belong to my country anymore, but I also know that I'm not from here. People remind me of that all the time. I'm not 'American.' I don't know what that makes me, but it's how I feel.

Participants identified their experiences living in the United States as a privilege muddied by the burden of leaving behind cherished cultural familiarities, simplicity, and community in their home countries. A participant of Peruvian descent reflected,

Even with everything that's wrong \back home, I love my country and I love the people in my community there. They are simple people. They have very little, but they're happy. There's a sense of community that I don't think is possible here in the U.S. it feels like there isn't anyone to really share this experience with though. It's a part of who I am, and I'm grateful for my family's sacrifices, but not many people understand this experience.

A participant of Ecuadorian descent explored the challenges of assimilation and social expectations. She stated,

I love the U.S., but there are things we need to work on as a county, especially when it comes to immigration. I'm a DACA recipient. A lot of people don't see me as being American or a valued part of the U.S. They look at us as foreigners, but I was raised here. The U.S. is all I have ever known, really. Sometimes I think about it, and it feels like everyone wants to do the 'American thing' and go by the American culture, but not give us any of the benefits and value that Americans can appreciate. I call myself Ecuadorian-American, but some people will never see me that way. I was raised here, and my roots are Ecuadorian. It's a part of my family's story and who we are. I want to preserve that part of who I am. It's hard because some people even question my Latinx identity... Why question who I am and what my culture is? I've come to understand that people question my background because I'm white-passing. Either way though, it doesn't matter what they think or what they assume my culture should be, because I know who I am.

Domain: Impact and Perceptions of Immigration Policy

The Impact and Perceptions of Immigration Policy domain unfolded across three distinct categories: disruption of family unity and stability due to deportation (typical); reflections and interpretations of the immigration system as unjust (typical); and willingness to endure illegal

border crossing for reunification (variant). Narratives reveal the profound emotional and psychological toll exacted on families as a result of punitive immigration policies and deportation, with the enduring trauma magnified by the uncertainty of reunification. Participants reflected on their interpretations of the immigration system as inherently unjust. This perception was not merely rooted in the experience of undocumented status, but also intricately tied the labyrinthine nature of immigration policies and procedures. Moreover, emphasizing the deeply personal and compelling motivations that drive individuals to endure illegal immigration were the stories of participants who revealed their family's willingness to endure the perils of illegal border crossing for the sake of family reunification.

Category: Disruption of family unity and stability due to deportation. Participants described the disruption of family unity and stability resulting from deportation. They articulated the ongoing hardships faced by their deported family members, particularly fathers, in their home countries. Participants expressed concern for the safety of their loved one's following deportation, where they are described to face isolation and hardship in securing basic necessities, such as housing and stable sources of income. They also explored how reception from extended family compounds the challenges, reflecting a broader societal failure in embracing those who have been deported. A participant of Mexican descent described the aftermath of her father's deportation, as she stated,

My father's family didn't welcome him when he was sent back to Mexico. It hurts because he's really struggling. He's trying to find a job and consistent housing, but things in Mexico are very difficult. He had been in this country for a long time and was sent back to a place that wasn't really his home anymore. Every week, I send money back home to help him. It's the least that I could do, and it helps to know that he will at least be able to buy himself food or find a place to sleep for a night. The system was so cruel to my father.

Participants revealed the disruption enacted by deportation on their relationship with parents, emphasizing the crucial role of the deported parent within the family system, and the psychological distance that emerges between children and parents who remain. The narratives also delve into the emotional toll on the parents who grapple with financial strain, emotional distress, and the heavy burden of protecting their children while grieving the physical loss of their deported partner. A participant of Peruvian descent described the aftermath of her father's deportation, as she stated,

My mom always worked very hard. When my dad was deported, we were okay, but she was very afraid. She would never admit it and she would never cry in front of me and my brother, but we would hear her in her room. There was a time when I was having trouble sleeping. I remember going into my mom's room to sleep with her and she'd try to hide that she had been crying. It was the worst feeling in the world to see her that way and to know that I couldn't help her. We had no control over what was happening to our family. The lack of control and agency in the face of immigration enforcement amplified the

vulnerability of families torn apart by deportation. A participant of Peruvian descent, who also experienced the deportation of her father, stated,

I didn't understand why my dad was taken away. I didn't understand what it meant to be undocumented. When my dad was deported, I remember I just kept asking for him. I was always such a daddy's girl and from one day to the next, he just didn't come home.

Category: Reflections and interpretations of the immigration system as unjust.

Revealed as a typical theme, participants expressed a deep sense of disillusionment with the immigration system, questioning its morality and fairness. A participant of Brazilian descent described,

I think what hurts the most is that my father is a good person. A father, a hard worker, a good husband... A lot of the deportation and immigration stuff that we've had to go through, we haven't deserved. No one deserves it.

Participants revealed a landscape of fear, with anxiety extending to encounters with law enforcement even among participants with U.S. citizenship, evidence of the psychological

impact of living under the perceived power and control wielded by government and law enforcement over immigrant families. The pervading sense of loss, the emotional toll of sudden deportations, and the systemic targeting during immigration raids underscore the profound injustice felt by the participants and their families. A participant of Mexican descent stated,

My parents struggled a lot over the years and for what? My dad was treated like he didn't matter. He spent weeks locked up in a detention center and then shipped off like he wasn't even human...It felt like it was all taken away from us without any reason. In a way, when they deported my dad, they took away the most precious thing I could ever have. They took away my life with my dad. They took away the most precious things in my dad's life, too—his kids and his family.

Overall, these narratives depict a complex web of challenges arising from immigration policies, which are perceived as arbitrary, discriminatory, and punitive, leaving individuals and families grappling with the enduring consequences of its actions. Participants highlighted,

Category: Willingness to endure the perils of illegal border crossing for reunification.

As a variant theme, participants revealed that when faced with limited legal avenues for immigration, families are compelled to endure the profound risks associated with unauthorized migration, in the hopes of family reunification. Participant accounts depict the treacherous journey through inhospitable conditions, involving extreme weather, deprivation of basic needs, and the looming threat of violence. In describing her father's attempt to reunite with his family in the U.S., a participant of Mexican descent, disclosed the tragic story of a fellow traveler who succumbed to dehydration, accentuating the life-threatening nature of the trip.

I don't want to lose my father. He traveled to try to cross the border, but he didn't make it here. He told me it was very difficult. There is nowhere to sleep. There was a lot of violence...He was traveling with a group of teenage boys. There was a heat wave, and they ran out of water. They had no more food left. They stopped to rest somewhere and when they woke up, one of the boys that had been traveling with them didn't wake up. He died of dehydration. That could have been my father. He ended up getting caught by immigration and all of that struggle was for nothing. I guess that's my fear. It's not worth sacrificing his life. If he tries to cross again and something happens to him, there's no

guarantee that we will ever hear from him again. It's easier for us to wait and go through the legal system. It might seem like a long time to be apart, but maybe it'll go by quickly.

Participants' fears for their parents' safety when attempting illegal border crossings permeate their narratives. While some express a preference for waiting, navigating legal channels, despite prolonged separation, others are deeply compelled to reunify their families, no matter the costs. These stories unveil a complex calculus of hope, longing, risk, and sacrifice woven into the fabric of undocumented families.

Domain: Informing Intervention

In the domain of informing intervention, three distinct categories emerged: psychological symptomatology (typical), difficulty accessing culturally informed care (typical), and mental health stigmas a barrier to accessing care (variant).

Category: Psychological symptomatology upon reunification. Although all participants revealed a deep longing for reunification, participants described a complex and nuanced process of reunification, highlighting an undercurrent of ambivalence despite the deep longing for familial unity. Upon reunification, the need to redefine familial roles, assimilate into a new country, and cope with the loss of kinship caregivers and cultural familiarities contributed to a traumatic experience. Additionally, accounts of childhood trauma and abuse, during periods of parental absence, ranging from physical abuse to sexual violence, and loss, appeared to further compound adversities of immigration and post-reunification adjustment. Participants described the initial reunification with their parents as intricately linked with experiences of loss and pain. The disruption of reunification contributed to feelings of anger, displacement, depression, anxiety, and in some cases, suicidality. Those with a history of self-injurious behaviors, expressed a sense of invisibility, loneliness, and longing for connection. A participant of Ecuadorian descent disclosed,

I was acting out all of those years because I felt invisible and alone. I didn't understand all the changes that happened in my family. I didn't want things to be the way that they were. I risked my life so many times. I have scars on my body that are always going to remind me of where I've been and the things that I have done.

Category: *Difficulty accessing culturally informed care.* Nearly half of the participants describe challenges in accessing culturally informed psychotherapy. Participants described encounters with clinicians who, despite good intentions, failed to grasp the cultural, familial, and identity disruptions that ensue, and the inherent trauma the experience bares. Moreover, participants articulated a need for clinicians who could navigate the delicate balance between cultural understanding and recognizing the individual's unique struggles beyond cultural stereotypes. A participant of Peruvian descent described her experiences in therapy, as she explained,

A therapist being from the same background as me isn't the only thing that matters. I love that I am Peruvian and American, but that doesn't define every part of who I am. There are some things, culturally, that may be typical of Peruvian values, but I'm also my own person and I have my own thoughts and values. I want my therapist to understand where I'm from and the things that matter to me, but sometimes, when I've worked with therapists who were also Hispanic, it felt like they were imposing their own views on me...It's as though they believed that because we were from the same background, they understood me. I want to feel understood... I haven't found that yet.

Category: *Mental health stigma as a barrier to accessing care.* Although identified as a variant category, mental health stigma within Latinx families significantly influenced access to care. Participants emphasized the reluctance and unfamiliarity of their families, rooted in cultural norms, to acknowledge mental health needs. A participant of Brazilian descent described,

My parents never mentioned therapy. It's not because they have anything against it. It's just not a part of who they are. No one gets that kind of help so it's hard to know when you need it or how to access it if you have no exposure to it.

While some families were open to addressing psychological health concerns through prayer and religious means, others struggled to accept and access therapeutic interventions.

Participants shared how they had to persuade parents and family members to prioritize their psychological needs, illustrating the tension between longstanding cultural beliefs and embracing therapeutic care. A participant of Ecuadorian descent, who experienced clinical symptomatology, described her experience. She stated,

I had been self-injuring for years and my mom's solution for so long was to just pray about it. I knew that I needed something different. My mom still doesn't really understand. She's very Christian and she believes that God can heal depression and the pain that I've been through, but I know that isn't true.

Overall, these findings underscore the formidable impact of mental health stigma, hindering individuals from accessing necessary support and perpetuating a cycle of silence around psychological pain within immigrant communities.

Discussion

Previous research underscores the profound impact of family separation on Latinx youth, emphasizing the emotional, developmental, and cultural challenges that arise (e.g., Brabeck & Xu, 2022; Rivas et al., 2021; Villalobos et al., 2023). Building upon this body of work, this study offers an in-depth examination of the reorganization of family roles, disruptions in attachment bonds, and the negotiation of cultural identity. Grounded in attachment and family systems theories, and the framework of ambiguous loss, this study's findings addressed three central research questions: 1) How do Latinx youth experience and cope with the psychological and emotional impacts of family separation, particularly in terms of attachment and family relationships, 2) In what ways do separation and reunification influence Latinx youth's sense of cultural identity, belonging, and acculturation in the U.S. and, 3) How do Latinx immigrant families perceive and engage with mental health care, and what gaps exist in meeting their unique needs.

Family Reorganization, Attachment, and Ambiguous Loss

Consistent with Lu et al. (2020), who describe the fragmentation of family dynamics in the context of piecemeal migration and deportation, our findings illustrate the profound impact of these separations on various relational bonds within the family system. The findings highlight that family separation and reunification, rather than being discrete events, are continuous processes marked by shifting attachments, layered grief, and gradual relational repair. Reorganization processes extend across multiple relationships, involving not only parent-child dynamics but also siblings and kinship caregivers who assume primary caregiving roles during periods of parental absence. Upon reunification, families undergo another phase of transformation, where efforts to reintegrate and rebuild disrupted attachments are compounded by ambiguous loss.

Our findings suggest that separation often leads to fragmentation within the parent-child relationship, particularly with mothers who have migrated. For many participants, parental absence engendered emotional detachment, marked by feelings of abandonment, resentment, and unmet expectations upon reunification. This sense of detachment aligns with attachment theory, which suggests that secure bonds, once disrupted, are challenging to restore (Ainsworth, 1989). Consistent with findings from Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco (2002), immigrant children frequently encounter emotional dissonance during reunification, as they reconcile the idealized image of an absent parent with the realities of a new, often unfamiliar, relationship. In our study, this dissonance was compounded by the prolonged nature of separation, leading many youth to feel emotionally distant or alienated from their parents upon their return.

During parental absence, youth formed strong attachments to kinship caregivers, particularly grandmothers, who provided a sense of stability, nurturance, and continuity. This adaptive shift, in line with attachment theory, suggests that children seek alternative attachment

figures to fulfill their emotional needs in the absence of primary caregivers. These relationships grounded children in cultural familiarity, offering a sense of continuity despite the ongoing changes in their family structure. However, reunification with parents brought about another profound shift: the departure from kinship caregivers and the emotional security they represented. Reunification was experienced not as a seamless reorganization of the family structure but as a period marked by ambiguous loss. Youth grappled with the duality of reunification with their parents while simultaneously mourning the loss of kinship caregivers. For many, these kinship caregivers were the only caregivers they had known. These findings echo Falicov et al.'s (2020) notion of "cultural mourning," where grief stems from leaving behind trusted relationships and the familiar cultural environment that kinship caregivers provided, manifesting in resistance and sorrow.

The findings illustrate that youth's emotional responses to reunification were varied, often reflecting unresolved feelings of abandonment and frustration. The idealized image of an absent parent frequently clashed with the realities of their return, creating emotional dissonance. This aligns with existing literature, such as Stein et al. (2019), which emphasizes that the anticipation of reunification can lead to significant emotional conflict when expectations are unmet. Participants reported feelings of resentment toward parents who were absent for long periods, complicating relational repair.

Despite these challenges, many participants demonstrated resilience and a gradual willingness to reconcile with their parents over time. This process of relational repair was not linear, marked by moments of shared understanding, but also persistent and unresolved feelings of abandonment. Nonetheless, all participants contextualized their parents' migration as a necessary sacrifice, fostering empathy and connection. Conceptualizing reconciliation as a

continuum, rather than immediate outcomes, highlights the nuanced ways in which Latinx youth cope with the emotional impacts of family separation and work to rebuild attachments within their family systems in the wake of prolonged separations.

Cultural Identity and Belonging, and Impact of Immigration Policy

Our findings also contribute to existing research on the intersection of immigration policy and cultural identity, underscoring themes of exclusion, resilience, and identity formation. Consistent with recent empirical studies highlighting the psychological impacts of restrictive immigration policies (e.g., Suarez-Orozco et al., 2018; Gonzales et al., 2020), participants in this study reported heightened feelings of marginalization and fear. Yet, they simultaneously engaged in a complex identity negotiation, holding onto pride in their cultural heritage while simultaneously navigating the pressures of acculturation. This negotiation was not a solitary struggle, but one that was deeply relational, influencing family dynamics, attachment, and intergenerational understanding.

A notable theme in the findings was the pervasive sense of hypervigilance that affects participants' daily lives. This vigilance was not only an expressed fear but an ingrained response developed in the context of systemic marginalization of the perceived threat of deportation or family separation. Participants described how this constant alertness affected even mundane activities, creating an underlying tension in their family environment. Children learned, both explicitly and implicitly, to remain unseen, and to minimize interactions with authority figures—a mindset passed down from their parents, who modeled this behavior as a means of protecting their families. This vigilance became an intergenerational pattern, where both parents and children internalized an awareness of the risks associated with their immigrant identity, independent of their immigration status.

The findings also highlighted a broader cultural dissonance rooted in differing levels of acculturation between parents and children. For parents, who often held traditional Latino values emphasizing respect, family cohesion, and deference to authority, this cautious behavior extended beyond immigration concerns. It was also tied to preserving cultural values and maintaining family stability. When children, influenced by American norms and the expectations to assimilate, sought to assert themselves and engage more openly in social spaces, they perceived their parents' responses as critical or dismissive. Participants, trying to balance the weight of family expectations with the desire to belong in their social environments, often felt misunderstood or constrained. They found themselves navigating two contrasting worlds—one defined by their parents' expectations rooted in vigilance and tradition and the other by their own desire to belong to a culture that could embrace them and encourage individual expression and social integration—creating an ongoing internal conflict.

Over time, these conflicting cultural expectations created a fragmented sense of belonging. Participants described feeling “caught between two worlds,” striving to honor their cultural roots and the societal demands of the U.S. This internal split was often compounded by a deep sense of duty to honor their parents' sacrifices, which many participants internalized as a pressure to excel academically and financially. For them, success was not just a personal achievement but a form of validating their family's migration journey—a way to ‘repay’ their parents for the hardships they endured. However, this internalized responsibility often created tension within families as younger generations adapted to American cultural norms that sometimes conflicted with their parents' traditional Latino values.

Further complicating this experience was the pervading sense of ambiguous loss, as participants expressed a longing for cultural familiarity and a place that felt like “home.” This

yearning for the life left behind coexisted with the realities of discrimination and systemic oppression in the U.S., where participants often felt ‘othered’ in school and community settings, where they were marked by their immigrant identity. This experience of marginalization further reinforced a fragmented sense of belonging, as they were often reminded of their “illegality” in U.S. society while simultaneously being distanced from their cultural roots and the life they left behind.

Together, these findings illustrate the process of developing a sense of belonging for Latinx immigrant families is not merely a cultural journey but one shaped by broader socio-political forces that directly impact their sense of security and inclusion. The dual pressures of acculturation and policy-driven hardships demand a nuanced understanding of how cultural and systemic factors intersect, influencing the identity formation and relational dynamics within immigrant families.

Informing Intervention

The findings from this study offer critical insights for clinicians working with Latinx immigrant families, emphasizing the need for culturally congruent, trauma-informed, and relationally attuned therapeutic practices. The symptoms reported by participants—chronic stress, anxiety, depression, and self-injury—are not merely responses to isolated stressors. Our findings suggest they are manifestations of cumulative and intergenerational trauma that spans pre- and post-migration experiences.

To effectively support Latinx immigrant families, clinicians must approach therapeutic work with a commitment to cultural responsiveness, integrating practices that resonate with the core values of Latinx communities, such as *familismo* and *respeto*. These values shape family dynamics and inform the way Latinx families experience and cope with separation, reunification,

and repair. Therapeutic models that embrace the importance of relational bonds can facilitate trust and create an environment where families feel seen and understood. The findings also underscore the pivotal role of kinship caregivers in providing emotional stability during periods of parental absence. Interventions should acknowledge and include these caregivers as part of the therapeutic process, thereby reinforcing a continuum of support that bridges generational and cultural divides. By involving kinship figures, clinicians can strengthen the familial network and begin to address intergenerational experiences of trauma.

The study also reveals a need for shared spaces where youth can explore and express their bicultural identities, recognizing that their sense of belonging is often complex and multifaceted. The tension between maintaining cultural roots and navigating acculturation pressures engenders feelings of uncertainty and invisibility. Clinicians should prioritize interventions that acknowledge and validate these bicultural challenges. Facilitating group-based interventions, community workshops, and peer support programs where youth can share experiences and learn from one another is critical. Such spaces can significantly reduce feelings of isolation, foster a sense of community, and reinforce cultural and communal bonds.

The stigma surrounding mental health in the Latinx community, as noted by participants, continues to act as a barrier to care. Clinicians are called to take an active role in community-centered approaches that integrate psychoeducation with cultural affirmation. Working alongside trusted community partners and faith-based organizations can help bridge cultural perspectives with the benefits of mental health care. Presenting mental health care as a pathway that upholds collective strengths and family unity can demystify services and reduce stigma, encouraging families to seek the support they need.

Finally, the intersection of clinical work and systemic advocacy cannot be overlooked. In an area where restrictive immigration policies, anti-immigration rhetoric, and systemic marginalization threaten the stability and mental health of Latinx families, clinicians have a responsibility to advocate for humane and family-centered policies. Forming interdisciplinary partnerships and building coalitions with legal and social services agencies are vital steps in creating a safety net that extends beyond the therapy room. Clinicians who engage in advocacy are not only supporting individual growth and healing but are working toward dismantling systems that perpetuate fear, instability, and trauma. In doing so, they contribute to build environments that foster resilience, promote justice, and affirm the humanity and worth of every immigrant family.

In sum, the overarching goal of this exploration was to empower those who have confronted the uncertainties and challenges associated with immigration and family separation, providing them with a platform to share their lived experiences. This exploration, the questions it sought to answer, and the chosen methodology, were driven by a recognition that, in order to bridge gaps between Latinx communities and mental health services, we must amplify and extend the voice of experts to those who have lived these realities. Consequently, the findings and implications derived from this project are directly rooted in the narratives shared by participants.

Limitations

This study provides valuable insights into the experience of Latinx youth and families facing family separation and reunification due to migration. However, several limitations should be noted. First, while the sample included diverse Latinx participants, the study's findings may not capture the full range of experiences among Latinx populations across different socio-

economic statuses, countries of origin, or migration histories. Additionally, this study's qualitative design allows for in-depth exploration but limits generalizability. The findings are specific to the participants' lived experiences, which may not be universally applicable to all Latinx immigrant families. Second, the study relied on retrospective self-report data, which could be influenced by memory recall biases, particularly regarding emotional experiences tied to past separation and reunification. Some participants' responses may reflect their current understanding rather than the immediate feelings they experienced during those events. Further, this study did not account for the impact of carrying lengths of separation, which could influence the reorganization of family roles and attachment dynamics. Future research would benefit from longitudinal designs to better capture how these dynamics evolve. Third, this study did not include the perspectives of parents or extended caregivers. As these figures play significant roles in family reorganization, future studies that incorporate multi-informant perspectives could yield a more nuanced understanding of the familial impacts of separation.

In conclusion, this study highlights the resilience and strength of Latinx immigrant families in the face of significant challenges. By integrating culturally informed and trauma-responsive approaches, we can better support these families in navigating the complexities of family separation, reunification, and acculturation. Addressing systemic inequities and advocating for greater justice in clinical practice, immigration policy, and community spaces are important steps toward promoting the well-being and resilience of Latinx families. By amplifying the voices of those affected and integrating their insights with empirical evidence, we can develop interventions that are truly responsive to their needs and experiences, fostering a most supportive environment for all.

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Appendix A

Table 1

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

<p>Involvement in Migration Decision</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Reason for migration ● Feelings about migration ● Role in the decision to migrate
<p>Early Experiences and Acculturation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Experience being an immigrant youth in the United States ● Any tensions between the two cultures ● Experiences of discrimination and not belonging ● How these conflicts have affected identity development
<p>Experiences of Separation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Whom were you separated from ● Who served as your primary caregiver during this time ● Describe experiences of family separation and any disruptions it may have caused ● How have these experiences affected relationships with family members
<p>Family Characteristics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What are the big issues in your family ● How would you describe your relationship with family members ● In what ways have stressors and other separation-related conflicts been resolved ● How are immigration-related experiences discussed within the family
<p>Community Characteristics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What resources were available to support you and/or your family ● Are there any supports you wish you had
<p>Individual Characteristics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How are things now in regard to family relationships and your personal well-being ● Where do you see yourself in 5-years
<p>Closing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What advice would you give someone going through family separation now ● Are there any factors that we haven't discussed that you think are important to share

Appendix B

Table 2

Participant Demographics

Age	Gender	Country of Origin	Age at Separation	Length of Separation	Form of Separation
23	Female	Dominican Republic	6 years old	7 years	Piecemeal
23	Female	El Salvador	3 years old	5 years	Piecemeal
22	Male	El Salvador	7 months old	5 years	Piecemeal
21	Female	Ecuador	2 months old	10 years	Piecemeal
25	Female	Ecuador	2 months old	4 years	Piecemeal
20	Female	Brazil	11 years old	Ongoing	Piecemeal
23	Female	Brazil	10 years old	3 years	Deportation
34	Female	Peru	14 years old	4 years	Deportation
22	Female	Peru	11 years old	Ongoing	Deportation
21	Female	Mexico	14 years old	Ongoing	Deportation

Appendix C

Table 3

Core Idea Conversion Examples

Domain/Category	Raw data	Core idea conversion
Family Reorganization During Separation Fragmented Parent-Child Relationship	I have this distant memory of like everyone sort of crying and like hugging and were just all standing there. I remember I was like uh why is everyone getting so emotional about this random lady. I distinctly remember like my mom crouching down and hugging me and telling me that she missed me so much and stuff like that. I was just wondering like who is this person and why is she hugging me right now? And why is she crying so much?	I have this distant memory of everyone crying and hugging. We were all standing there. I remember thinking, 'Why is everyone getting so emotional about this random lady?' I distinctly remember my mom crouching down and hugging me. She was telling me that she missed me so much. I was just wondering, 'Who is this person and why is she hugging me right now? Why is she crying so much?'
Ambiguous Loss Unresolved Emotions Surrounding the Absence and Its Impact	I don't know. At first I felt angry I think towards my mom mostly like I was upset with her, you know? I was angry that she had brought me over here like I didn't want that or ask for that, you know? But at the same time, I was like okay I can finally have the mother-daughter relationship with her that I had wanted when I was in El Salvador and stuff.	At first, I felt angry towards my mom. I was upset with her. I was angry that she had brought me I didn't want that or ask for that. At the same time, I was looking forward to finally having the mother-daughter relationship that I had wanted when I was in El Salvador.

Appendix D

Table 4

Domain Cross-Analysis Representativeness

Domain/Category	Frequency
Family Reorganization During Separation	
● Fragmented Parent-Child Relationship	General
● Feelings of Loss, Nostalgia, and Longing for Reunification	Typical
● Resilient Bonds with Kinship Caregivers	Typical
● Relationship Strain Between Child and Parent who Remains	Variant
Family Reorganization Upon Reunification	
● Parent-Child Estrangement Upon Reunification	Typical
● Longing for Familiarity and Kinship Caregivers	Typical
● Lingering Resentment Towards Parents	Typical
● Reconciliation and Rebuilding of Relationships	Typical
● Sudden and Disruptive Reunification	Variant
Ambiguous Loss	
● Persistent Feelings of Grief and Longing for a Complete Family	Typical
● Unresolved Emotions Surrounding the Absence and Its Impact	Typical
Culture, Identity, and Belonging	
● Feeling of Responsibility to Validate Parents' Sacrifices	General
● Cultural Identity, Displacement, Isolation, and Not Belonging	General
Impact and Perception of Immigration Policy	
● Disruption of Family Unity and Stability due to Deportation	Typical
● Reflections and Interpretations of the Immigration System as Unjust	Typical
● Willingness to Endure Illegal Border Crossing for Reunification	Variant
Informing Intervention	
● Psychological Symptomatology Following Reunification	Typical
● Difficulty Accessing Culturally Informed Care	Typical
● Mental Health Stigma as a Barrier to Accessing Care	Variant

Frequency labels—*General*, theme represented in all or all but one case; *Typical*, occurs in between half and less than all cases; *Variant*, represented in less than half but more than two cases; *Rare*, theme only occurs in two or less cases.