

Central American Mothers' Perspectives on their Recently Arrived Children's New Sibling Relationships

Sandra Castro, PhD (Adelphi University)
scaastro@adelphi.edu

For transnational Central American mothers and their children, reunification in the US after years of separation represents a new life. Many mothers understand the complications of children integrating and forming blended families in a new home. In particular, recently arrived children must form critical sibling relationships.

Here, drawing on my doctoral dissertation on transnational Central American mothers from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala migrating between 1976-2018 and, years later, reuniting with their children (Castro 2021), I explore how recently arrived children experience reunification with siblings in blended families through their mothers' eyes. To center mothers' voices, I used a phenomenological approach to examine how they lived their reunification and observed their children's interactions within new family arrangements. Phenomenology provided a useful mechanism to highlight their perspectives (Jackson 2015). Primary data included interviews conducted in Spanish and informal conversations with 25 mothers and their children.

Extant literature on transnational families' reunification experiences focuses on those from the global south migrating to the US and leaving children behind, establishing transnational families across borders (Dreby and Adkins 2010). The literature on Central American mothers describes women migrants' flow to the US over the last four decades due to war, violence, and social dislocation (Menjívar 2006). Economic providers from abroad, these mothers sought employment to support their families (Abrego 2014). The undocumented mothers, once in the US, had to wait years for reunification. Many experienced precarious hope amid limited legal pathways like the U-Visa, amnesty laws, marriage and/or employer sponsorship, or asylum (Parla 2019).

Literature has grown in parallel with unaccompanied minors and asylum-seeking families' increasing migration (Barros-Lane, Brabeck, and Berger Cardoso 2022). Young immigrant children seem to have little autonomy when reunifying with their mothers, transitioning uneasily to living together again (Arnold 1997; Suárez-Orozco, Bang, and Kim 2011). This is also due to the additional rupture they experienced in their kinship ties to their caretakers, usually grandparents, in their home countries who they had to leave behind.

Upon reunification, children may experience what Greif describes as "ambiguous reunification" derived from Pauline Boss' Ambiguous Loss theory, which describes separation and loss without closure. Ambiguous reunification exists after family members have experienced long periods of

separation but continue to feel uncertainty and disorientation when reunited and building new a life together (Greif 2012).

Reunification, although welcome, imposes social costs. Many mothers work full-time, doing low-pay domestic and service-sector work. Having little time to spend with children inhibits family-reconstitution efforts. Many mothers rely on older siblings, especially girls, to perform caretaking duties (Arnold 1997; Lee and Pacini-Ketchabaw 2011). A feminist lens highlights the power relations in kinship networks in newly reunited immigrant families, especially for blended families with single mothers impacted by gender and generational inequalities.

La Nueva Familia: The Blended Family

For mothers in this study, children's long-delayed arrival shifted the dynamics of their lives. Mothers expressed feeling a lack of trust, respect, and recognition of their sacrifice. Children who grew up living with their extended families, but who now entered a blended nuclear family, experienced a shift. These family relationships created numerous challenges for mothers, siblings, and stepparents.

Conflict with Siblings

Mothers described witnessing their children interact tensely with younger siblings. Some mothers reported jealousy, indicating that children who experienced multi-year separation said they felt less loved. This occurred with children arriving as adolescents but whose younger siblings grew up with their mothers. Martha, from Honduras, explains how expectations and experiences colored sibling relationships:

My [younger daughter] has always been good, and I feel like the other two [who arrived recently from Honduras] picked on her because they were jealous. She is a good girl and does her best in school, and these two always have to bother her. One time, my daughter was staying out and not coming home straight from school. I asked my younger daughter if she knew anything and she started crying that she couldn't tell me, or her sister would hit her. They would threaten her if she said anything to me about the trouble they were getting into. (December 2019)

Supportive Siblings

Participants mentioned their children helping them care for younger siblings. One mother, Francisca, discussed her newly reunified daughter helping her son prepare for school and board the bus. After school, her daughter awaited him while Francisca worked late. Another mother, Ela,

said her two older daughters, coming to the US as teenagers, helped care for four younger siblings, one with multiple special needs. Mothers viewed caretaking as creating a special bond. These experiences demonstrate mothers' reliance on older siblings — especially daughters — for caretaking and/or household chores in these new family units.

With mothers as breadwinners, working exhausting hours, they generally viewed older children as helpers (Lee and Pacini-Ketchabaw 2011). However, boys didn't have the same caretaking and domestic obligations; they usually had substantial independence. Older adolescent boys were expected just to work and contribute financially.

Some older children looked forward to meeting their siblings. The following dialogue features Magda, who arrived at 18 from Guatemala to reunite with her mother and little sister:

SC: How was it meeting your little sister for the first time?

Magda: It was good. I said to myself, I had to come all the way here to meet my little sister. I had been waiting all this time. We didn't talk too much at first because she mostly spoke English, but, after some time, she started to speak more Spanish. You know...to be able to talk to me.

SC: Did you get along?

Magda: Yes, of course. Between sisters, there are always good and bad times, right?

Mixed-Status Families Paving Divergent Paths

Despite loving their children equally, participants recognized that US-born children enjoyed greater possibilities. US-born children had more upward mobility through education, employment, and social capital. They could potentially attend college, become professionals, and launch careers. US-born children were described as good, rule-following students. Luz, from Honduras, speaks of her children's choices:

Elisa [US-born daughter] is incredible. I am so proud of the young woman she's become. She was the first of my children to graduate from college. I didn't go to school, so I am so proud of her. Elisa works hard and cleans houses and helps me too when I go clean houses. She also works to pay her education and support her baby. She's my greatest inspiration, as well as my other two sons [who were both born here]. Mario sings like an angel, and my youngest son is a wrestler in high school. I never miss a match. My other daughter has been working since she got here. She got with someone right away and got pregnant very quickly. She moved

in with him and is now raising her son. She didn't want to go to school. (November 2019)

The legal, linguistic, and institutional restraints of recently reunified children can obstruct equal success. The separation's effects, combined with difficulty adapting to a new language, culture, and education system, can result in newly reunified children struggling at home, at school, and in the community (Grzywacz et al. 2022).

Conclusions

We have examined children and siblings' reunification experiences. Mothers perceived newly arrived children as sometimes supportive and sometimes jealous. Unequal opportunities for upward mobility also impacted mothers' expectations and hopes, and, thus, siblings' reunification experiences. Mothers hoped newly arrived children would integrate and acculturate into US life but had greater optimism about their US-born children's prospects because of their English fluency and access to higher education and good jobs.

Children experienced what Grief (2012) describes as "ambiguous reunification" due to their difficulty with, and sometimes resistance to, adapting to blended family life with siblings and a distant parent. They experienced sentiments of ambiguity, uncertainty, and distrust of their mothers (Greif 2012). The older daughters who arrived as adolescents and teens were expected to care for siblings, due to their mother's work demands. Some older children felt resentment for having to do this, but for others, it also helped build strong bonds with younger siblings.

Note

This manuscript used pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants in the study.

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Author Biography

Sandra Castro is the Associate Dean of the College of Professional and Continuing Studies and the Interim Director of Latin American and Latinx Studies at Adelphi University in Long Island, New York. Her general research interests include Central American/Latinx Studies, Migration Studies, and Social Welfare. In particular, her recent research focuses on transnational Central American mothers' experiences of reunification with their children after years of separation.

Author Contact: Sandra Castro, PhD (Adelphi University), scastro@adelphi.edu

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