

# Acculturation and Conflict in Mexican Immigrants' Intimate Partnerships: The Role of Women's Labor Force Participation

Violence Against Women

15(10) 1194-1212

© The Author(s) 2009

Reprints and permission: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

DOI: 10.1177/1077801209345144

<http://vaw.sagepub.com>



Joseph G. Grzywacz,<sup>1</sup> Pamela Rao,<sup>2</sup>  
Amanda Gentry,<sup>3</sup> Antonio Marin,<sup>1</sup>  
and Thomas A. Arcury<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This study explores women's workforce participation as a potential agent for acculturation, and how it shapes conflict dynamics within intimate partnerships among Mexican immigrants. Analysis of in-depth interview data from 20 immigrant Mexican women and men believed to be in violent relationships indicated that women's employment following migration created several sources of intracouple conflict by challenging gender-based norms and behaviors surrounding the division of household labor, financial decision making, and how women and men interact within intimate relationships. Immigrant Latino women tended to embrace an assimilation strategy for acculturation, whereas immigrant Latino men embrace a separation strategy.

## Keywords

acculturation, conflict, dual-earner families, Mexican immigrants, women's employment

Acculturation, the process of individual and cultural change that occurs when members of different cultural groups come into extended contact (Berry, 2004), is believed to influence the personal relationships of immigrant women and men from Mexico who are currently living in the United States. Flores, Tschann, Marin, and Pantoja (2004), for example, suggested that acculturation creates a source of stress that contributes to marital conflict among

<sup>1</sup>Wake Forest University School of Medicine, Winston-Salem, NC

<sup>2</sup>Farmworker Justice, Washington, DC

<sup>3</sup>University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

## Corresponding Author:

Joseph G. Grzywacz, Department of Family and Community Medicine, Wake Forest University School of Medicine, Medical Center Boulevard, Winston-Salem, NC 27106

Email: [grzywacz@wfubmc.edu](mailto:grzywacz@wfubmc.edu)

immigrant couples. Similarly, other researchers argue that acculturation erodes marital quality and produces marital distress because it contributes to changing expectations of partners and the relationship itself (Casas & Ortiz, 1985; Negy & Snyder, 1997). The potential for erosion in the quality of marriages and intimate relationships is likely heightened when partners diverge in their adherence to traditional cultural norms and behaviors (Flores et al., 2004).

A fundamental gap in literature linking acculturation with couple outcomes is the absence of direct focus on explicit agents for acculturation and the linking mechanisms between acculturation and outcome. It is not clear, for example, which elements of daily life in the United States create challenges to strong relationships among immigrant couples. That is, researchers typically link measures of acculturation with outcomes of interest without considering how individuals arrived at their respective level of acculturation. Furthermore, rarely do researchers give explicit attention to the specific cultural beliefs or behaviors that are threatened or changed by experiences in the United States (Hunt, Schneider, & Comer, 2004). One element of Mexican culture that is frequently highlighted in research are beliefs about appropriate roles and responsibilities for women and men (Dion & Dion, 2001; Flores et al., 2004; Harris, Firestone, & Vega, 2005; Jasinski, 1998), yet few studies explicitly link changes in the cultural beliefs to functioning within relationships (Flores et al., 2004).

The goal of this article is to refine the discussion surrounding acculturation and family process among Mexican immigrants, with particular emphasis on conflict within intimate relationships. Drawing on in-depth interview data from nonpartnered Mexican women and men living in rural North Carolina who participated in an exploratory study of individuals in violent intimate relationships, this study focuses on one specific aspect of life in the United States, women's employment, as a potential agent of acculturation for Mexican immigrant couples. Our analysis examines how a woman's expanded responsibilities outside the home challenge customary behavior for women and men in Mexico and create sources of conflict within intimate partnerships.

## Literature Review

### *Conceptual and Empirical Foundation*

Acculturation is a complex phenomenon. At its core, acculturation refers to changes in basic cultural elements resulting from extended contact between groups of individuals with different cultural backgrounds (Berry, 2004). As implied by this definition, acculturation can occur on two distinct levels: Individual beliefs and values can change as a result of an individual group member's interactions with members of other groups (i.e., psychological change), and groups can change as the shared beliefs held among group members are modified to correspond with the experiences of individual members (i.e., cultural change). At the individual level, acculturation occurs through a variety of strategies representing the strength of allegiance to one's heritage culture and the desire to engage in the activities and customs of the larger hosting society. Whereas some immigrants arriving to the United States may pursue a separation strategy whereby they minimize contact with the host

society and adhere strongly to their heritage culture, others may pursue an assimilation strategy whereby they abandon their heritage culture and favor the customs and behaviors of the host society. Still, others may attempt to integrate both their heritage and host cultures into a cohesive (for them) whole.

Immigration creates opportunities for extended contact between people from different cultural backgrounds that can lead to acculturation, especially among in-migrants. Evidence suggests that acculturation contributes to conflict and strain in immigrant women's and men's intimate relationships. In a series of studies using the Marital Satisfaction Inventory-Revised, Negy and Snyder (1997, 2000) reported evidence that greater acculturation, particularly among wives, was associated with greater marital distress. For example, in one article, greater acculturation among wives was associated with greater distress over shared leisure time activities and sex, suggesting that women may acculturate more quickly than men and that they may seek to renegotiate traditional marital roles with men (Negy & Snyder, 1997). Similarly, Flores and colleagues (2004) suggested that wives who are highly acculturated become verbally and physically more aggressive as they place greater expectations for equality in the relationship on their husbands. Evidence from several studies in the violence literature further suggests that women's acculturation may empower them to attempt to renegotiate roles and responsibilities within the relationship, which may create strain and conflict and escalate to violence within intimate partnerships (Firestone, Harris, & Vega, 2003; Frias & Angel, 2005; Menjivar & Salcido, 2002).

There are two notable gaps in the literature linking acculturation to outcomes in Mexican immigrants' intimate relationships. First, there is little discussion of which aspects of daily life in the United States contribute to acculturation. It is unlikely that every element of life in the United States poses equal challenges to traditional Mexican beliefs and behaviors. Rather, it is more likely that some elements pose significant challenges, others pose modest and potentially benign effects, whereas others may support adherence to traditional cultural beliefs and behaviors. Indeed, Berry (2004) argued that the composition, strength, and size of the receiving immigrant community all exert a powerful effect on the acculturative strategies and rate of acculturation of arriving immigrants. Identifying circumstances that influence levels of acculturation or selection of acculturative strategies would offer insight into patterns of acculturation, such as asymmetrical acculturation by women and men that are presumed to undermine the quality of immigrants' intimate relationships.

Previous research also has not delineated or evaluated the specific elements of immigrants' heritage culture that is threatened by life in the United States. Recognizing that culture is composed of a wide variety of values and beliefs ranging from perceived causes of illness and disease to the most appropriate way of organizing life, it is imperative that researchers specify which elements of Mexican immigrants' culture are being challenged by experiences in the United States (Escobar, Hoyos Nervi, & Gara, 2000; Hunt et al., 2004). Authors sometimes suggest that everyday life in the United States challenges culturally based beliefs about women's and men's roles and responsibilities within intimate relationships (Dion & Dion, 2001; Flores et al., 2004; Harris et al., 2005; Jasinski, 1998); however, rarely are changes in these beliefs documented in research. Furthermore, the basic argument that Mexican couples adhere strongly to a gendered division of labor is

inconsistent with evidence suggesting substantial egalitarianism (Coltrane, Parke, & Adams, 2004; Hawkes & Taylor, 1975; Staples & Mirande, 1980; Vega, 1990). Studying specific elements of immigrants' native culture that are threatened by or changed by living in the United States offers needed detail for understanding how acculturation exerts its effects on phenomena of interest, such as relationship quality (Escobar et al., 2000; Hunt et al., 2004).

### *Women's Employment and Acculturation Processes*

Employment of married or partnered women is a fundamental change that frequently accompanies migration from Mexico to the United States. World Bank (2005) estimates indicate that substantially more women in the United States than Mexico are engaged in the labor force (70.2% in contrast to 43.2%). Estimates from the Mexican Migration Project, a panel study comprised of random samples drawn from 50 sending communities in Mexico in successive years from 1987 to 1996, indicated that approximately 50% of women who migrated to the United States reported working for pay while in the United States, whereas fewer than 24% of women who did not migrate participated in the labor force in Mexico (Cerrutti & Massey, 2001). Collectively, the evidence suggests that migration from Mexico to the United States promotes women's entrance into the paid labor force.

Differences in women's labor force participation between Mexico and the United States, particularly among married or partnered women, are likely driven by two interrelated factors. The first is the relatively greater opportunity for employment in the United States. In Mexico, strong beliefs that women are primarily responsible for child rearing and household maintenance while men should be breadwinners create substantial barriers to participating in the formal labor market, although women frequently find work in the secondary labor market by providing personal services for pay such as laundering or ironing (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992; Parrado & Zenteno, 2001). Second, Latino families, including Mexican immigrants, face high rates of underemployment and poverty in the United States (Bernal & Enchautegui-de-Jesus, 1994; Lichter & Landale, 1995). The combination of high poverty rates, generally higher cost of living in the United States relative to Mexico, the fact that most Mexican immigrants come to the United States seeking economic security for their families, and relatively greater employment opportunities for women all contribute to women's entrance into the labor force (Baker, 2004).

A woman's entrance into the labor force contributes to changes within her marital dyad or intimate partnership. Evidence suggests that husbands' share of household labor tends to increase when wives become employed (Coltrane, 2000). Although the evidence is mixed, there is some evidence suggesting that greater involvement in household tasks by men undermines their mental health and promotes marital conflict (Glass & Fujimoto, 1994; Mederer, 1993; Shelton & John, 1996). Several researchers have commented on how the pace of life intensifies and perceived available time decreases when both spouses are employed (Hochschild, 1997; Jacobs & Gerson, 2001; Roxburgh, 2004). Finally, women's labor force participation and their subsequent contributions to family earnings can alter power dynamics within relationships, an alteration that can be perceived by men as threatening (Komter, 1989; Spitze, 1988). In short, evidence suggests that women's entrance into the labor force requires couples to design and renegotiate the responsibilities and activities of daily family life.

Likewise, women's employment contributes to changes within immigrant Mexicans' marriages and intimate relationships (Ybarra, 1982). Contrary to the popular belief that they are authoritarian rulers who are generally removed from daily home and family responsibilities, evidence suggests that Mexican men spend more time in household chores and child care when their wives enter the labor force and as wives' working hours and relative proportion of household earnings increases (Coltrane et al., 2004; Staples & Mirande, 1980; Ybarra, 1982). Mexican men may recognize that their wives' employment provides needed family resources and economic security; however, they may also feel threatened by their wives' earnings and respond reluctantly to her requests for assistance with household tasks (Coltrane & Valdez, 1993; Menjivar, 1999). Furthermore, evidence suggests that the transfer of household responsibilities to men requires considerable effort on the part of women, and some researchers question whether the effort is well spent (Meleis, Douglas, Eribes, Shih, & Messias, 1996). This research, although underdeveloped, suggests that women's entrance into the formal labor force requires Mexican couples to renegotiate roles and responsibilities within the family (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992).

## **Method**

The goal of this study was to refine discussions surrounding acculturation and family process among Mexican immigrants. Specifically, we sought to document if immigrants from Mexico attributed changes in their intimate relationships to women's participation in paid employment. We were interested in exploring if and how immigrant women and men attributed conflict within their intimate relationships to women's entrance into the labor force. The data used in this article were part of an exploratory project focused on intimate partner violence among Mexican immigrants.

### *Study Design and Locale*

This research used a qualitative design to explore and document the experiences of conflict in intimate relationships between Mexico-born men and women residing in rural North Carolina. The study focused on Mexico-born U.S. residents because they reflect the dominant Latino population in North Carolina (Guzmán & McConnell, 2002), thereby limiting heterogeneity in the sample that would result from including participants from several Latin American countries. Data collection was conducted in Caldwell and Catawba counties in western North Carolina. These counties were selected because they have experienced significant growth in their Latino populations since the 1990s resulting in receiving communities that are weak and diffuse relative to other regions of the country, such as Texas and California that have deeply entrenched Mexican communities. Similar to other North Carolina counties, their Latino populations grew substantially between 1990 and 2000, from 314 to 1,927 individuals (614%) in Caldwell County and from 921 to 7,886 (856%) in Catawba County. In 2000, the Latino population constituted 2.5% of the total population in Caldwell County and 5.6% in Catawba County. Immigrants in these counties are largely employed in low-income occupations, including farm work, landscaping, construction, poultry processing, furniture manufacturing, and service industries.

## Sample and Recruitment

The sample for this study consisted of 10 men and 10 women, all Mexico-born U.S. residents, who were currently or recently experiencing intimate partner violence. Because of the nature of the research, the interviewers avoided recruiting both members of married couples (or living as married) into the study. The sample size and composition were dictated by the difficulty of recruiting for and conducting interviews on a sensitive topic. Interviewers selected individuals who were believed to be involved in a violent relationship, based on a previous personal disclosure between the interviewer and individual or shared knowledge from the general community. Individuals were also selected based on whether the interviewer felt the person would be able to articulate their experiences about immigration as well as their experiences in the United States and their personal relationships without causing undue stress. Strict confidentiality was maintained with all participants so that only the interviewers would be aware of their participation in the study unless the participant chose to disclose that information to others. The researchers did not know the identity of the participants, nor was there any contact between the researchers and participants.

The 20 participants ranged in age between 20 and 52 years. All but one were married or living as married. Number of years spent living in the United States was between 1 and 15 years, with a median of 8 years. Educational levels were low, with nearly two thirds having attended school in Mexico only through the ninth grade. Only two attended any school in the United States. The number of children ranged between one and six. All men were working at the time of the interview. Although all women had worked at some time while in the United States, four were not working at the time of interview.

## Data Collection

*Interview guide.* Data collection for this study consisted of semistructured, in-depth interviews. A preliminary interview guide was created to elicit the participants' interpretation and experiences with intimate partner violence, their beliefs about women's and men's roles before and after immigration, and their thoughts on how changing roles might be a contributing factor to conflict between intimate partners. Probes regarding perceptions of women's employment, both in the United States and in Mexico, were incorporated throughout the interview guide. Sections of this draft guide were pretested with Mexican immigrants living outside the study area. The interview guide was modified based on the pretest to remedy inconsistent, unclear, or ambiguous items.

*Interviewers.* Participants were interviewed by one of two female interviewers, who were hired and trained specifically to collect in-depth data on a sensitive topic. Both interviewers were known and trusted members of the local Mexican communities. Both were thoroughly familiar with the larger Latino communities in their counties, and both had previous experience in conducting in-depth interviews on sensitive topics. Because of their connections with the community and the community-based service organizations, both knew of clients (men as well as women) who were believed to be currently or recently involved in violent relationships. The subject of this study required that the interviewers have special skills beyond being competent data collectors. They needed to be trusted by

the participants as persons with whom personal, possibly disturbing, information could be shared and who would respect their privacy.

*Interview process.* Interviews were conducted at a place and time in which each participant felt comfortable and safe. All interviews were conducted in Spanish and lasted between 1 and 2 hr. At the end of each interview, the participants were given referral information about services for immigrants in their area.

## Data Analysis

Procedures and standards described by Arcury and Quandt (1998) and echoed by Matthews (2005) for analyzing qualitative data were used. This method involves developing an in-depth knowledge of the content of the interviews through an iterative review process. During the initial review, recurring themes and patterns were identified in the transcripts. A set of categories, or codes, was created from these themes and patterns, which was then used to label text segments in the transcripts during the next review. Text pertaining to each code was compiled and summarized, and the transcripts were reviewed once more to identify linkages and interactions between concepts represented by the codes. An explanatory or descriptive model that addresses the research question was developed, tested, and finally refined by additional rounds of data review as needed (Bernard, 2002).

For this study, the 20 in-depth interviews were transcribed and translated into English by a professional translation service. The translations were reviewed for accuracy by native Spanish-speaking members of the research team. The transcripts were managed using ATLAS.ti (Muhr & Friese, 2004), a software program for text-based data analysis. The text of each transcript was then coded by one member of a three-person coding team. A matrix rotating responsibilities for primary versus secondary coding among the three-person coding team for each transcript was followed to minimize systematic coding biases. The primary coder was responsible for assigning initial codes to segments within the transcripts. The initial codes were then reviewed by the secondary coder. Disagreements in coding were resolved through discussion and consensus among the three coders during regular project meetings. Using ATLAS.ti, text pertaining to individual codes was summarized, and relationships between codes were identified in additional rounds of analysis. Excerpts from interviews are used to illustrate results from analyses. Each excerpt is followed by a unique participant identification number and the gender of the participant.

## Results

The lives and relationships of the men and women who participated in this study underwent significant changes in the general transition from Mexico to the United States, including specific changes in women's labor force participation. Beyond the difficulty of learning to function in a new society, participants reported that managing a two-earner household was challenging and a source of conflict within intimate relationships. A pervasive theme in the interviews was the tension caused by the changing expectations for men's and women's roles within the household and the renegotiation of several aspects of their intimate relationships that accompanied women's paid employment.

## Women's Paid Employment and the Changing Household Division of Labor

Participants described themselves as coming from strongly traditional backgrounds in Mexico, particularly with respect to men's and women's roles and responsibilities within the household. In Mexico, participants reported that the father's role was to provide for the family by earning an income, whereas the mother's role was to take care of hearth and home, especially the children. This household division of labor imposed specific responsibilities and privileges on the individual. Men worked outside the home to support the family and in turn were entitled to respect and obedience from their partner and children. Women maintained the household and took care of the children, and in turn their partners were obliged to provide financial security for them and their children.

And more than anything, [our husbands] have us there in the house so that when they get home from work, we have their food ready and have taken care of the children, so that then we can take care of them. (7-08-03, female participant)

My father always taught us that the man always has to be the one who wears the pants in the house. And the wife has to stay at home and do the household chores. (7-16-03, male participant)

Participants invoked the Mexican cultural tradition of *machismo* in emphasizing the importance of this household division of labor. Men who are *machistas* feel strongly that women should not work outside the house, should limit their interactions with unrelated males, and should be unquestioningly subservient. Both men and women were clear that *machismo* was an important factor in creating tension as role expectations became blurred.

I come from a culture where *machismo* exists. . . . And there, the women don't work, or they do very few things. Mostly, they are housewives because, more than anything, the man wants the woman to do what he says. (9-17-03, male participant)

*Machismo* is something that a man . . . that only a man is the boss, only the man has to work and can go out, and is the boss in every way. The women have to be in their houses, but the men are the men. (9-05-03, female participant)

After immigrating to the United States, participants found that organizing daily life around traditional men's and women's roles was no longer workable. The higher cost of living and low wage jobs for men necessitated women's entrance into the labor market to maintain the household. Men and women both recognized that women's paid employment was necessary to support the family in their new financial circumstances. As they observed that people around them were able to live better lives and provide better for their families when both partners were in paid employment, the women felt it only made sense to join the workforce as well. The men may not have always been happy with their women's new roles, but they recognized the financial value of the change just the same.

When we got here, my husband and I were in bad shape economically because I wasn't working. He didn't want me to look for work, but I wanted to. I saw other people who were getting ahead and so, then, I did the same thing. And now, we are better off financially. (9-16-03, female participant)

[The men let the women work] from necessity because they realize that with just the man's salary they can't manage all the bills and everything. So they let them work because they have to. (7-26-03, male participant)

Changes in the traditional division of labor for men and women in the household were reported to accompany women's entrance into the labor force. Both women and men described how responsibilities and activities of daily family life were renegotiated when women began working for pay. Women described having less time and energy to devote to tasks such as cooking and child rearing, the need for husbands/partners to perform a greater share of household tasks, and frustration with their partners' reluctance to help. They felt that their husbands had become used to treating them as maids, and that it did not make sense that they should have to continue being responsible for all the housework given that they were also working and earning for the household.

We both work, but he's never seen that I also get home tired. We do the same job and he knows how tired you get. But sometimes when we get home, he asks me for food and I have to make him some food. So then he gets upset because I don't make him something to eat earlier. The housework has to be done, but I think it should be done by both of us. (7-08-03, female participant)

Men described their new household responsibilities with frustration and nostalgia for the loss of the traditional household division of labor in Mexico. They had grown up watching the role their fathers had in the household and assumed that the same would hold for them when they became adults. They became frustrated when they realized that they no longer were able to expect the same level of deference and support in their own homes. The women were aware of this expectation on the men's part but had limited sympathy for it.

In Mexico, [I] knew that when I got home from work, the house . . . was always clean and the food was always ready, and she took care of me very well. . . . Here, things are different. Since she works, I have to make my own breakfast. I have to take care of the children in the morning. I have to feed them and all of these kinds of things. (9-09-03, male participant)

The thing is that in Mexico, the men are better attended to when they return from working. . . . He wanted everything to be ready when he got home—the house clean and the food ready. But that was impossible because I was also working the same shift that he was. At first, it made me feel bad, but now we both understand that if I'm working, it's for both of our benefit. (9-16-03, female participant)

## *Responses to the Changes in the Household Division of Labor*

In general, the changes in the household roles that accompanied women's paid employment were experienced more positively by women than men. Working outside the home gave many women a strong sense of empowerment and independence. Women reported that having their own money entitled them to participate in family decision making and gave them the right to make independent choices. The ability to support themselves, bolstered by the variety of social support services available to women in the United States, led women to conclude it was no longer necessary to put up with what they perceived as ill-treatment from their partners to survive and provide for their children. On having this made clear, several women reported that their partners did change their behavior for the better.

Since I am working, I realize that I can get ahead with my children. On the other hand, if I didn't work, I would have to ask him for help. I would be more tied to him. I see that I can get ahead. If I don't have him, it doesn't matter to me. (6-20-03, female participant)

And even more, he has changed his way of treating me. I think it's because he knows that we are not in our country and that the justice system is very different. Here a woman has more help. (7-11-03, female participant)

If I work, I don't have to tolerate all of his shit. (6-26-03, female participant)

The men in this study had a rather different perspective on the implications of women's entry into the labor force and subsequent changes in household roles and responsibilities. The most salient issue for many of the men was that they felt that they were no longer being given the respect that they received when living in Mexico. Not being the sole breadwinner meant they were no longer the de facto head of household, whose word was always final and whose needs were always met. Women no longer felt that they had to obey and serve their partners unquestioningly, which the men interpreted as a form of disrespect. Furthermore, men described how having to depend on (or allow) their partners to help support the family was demeaning because it implied that they were unable to fulfill their roles as men. Changes in the economic and power relationships translated directly, for the men, into changes in their personal worth within the home. Because of machismo, men felt they lost value in the eyes of society if they let their wives work, and even more so if their wives are working because men were unable to provide financial security for their family.

When the women work here, the man loses the value that he had there in his country. And it's all because the woman feels like she has more rights, because she is working and earning her own money. And that bothers me. (7-16-03, male participant)

When I brought her here, I didn't want her to work. But then I saw that there wasn't enough money, and I let her do it. But I feel frustrated and bad because I realize that my job doesn't provide enough. (9-09-03, male participant)

However, whereas men reported feeling demeaned or undignified because their partners needed to work, women believed their paid work threatened men's power advantage in the relationship. They felt that men did not want them to grow as individuals because it will make it harder for them to be controlled. Once a woman is no longer dependent on a man for her livelihood (and that of her children), she is less susceptible to threats of abuse or abandonment if she fails to obey.

I think [that a man feels threatened when his wife works] because he feels that she will no longer depend on him and she's not going to tolerate or put up with him. And so then he feels that he is on the edge of losing . . . and he thinks that if she continues to develop that he won't be able to go on ordering her around like he used to. (9-05-03, female participant)

[Mexican men] never let their wives work because they feel that if their wives work, the husbands will have less value. . . . He has always felt that if I work, I will make my own decisions and will not obey him in the way that he desires or do everything the ways he says exactly the way he says. (7-11-03, female participant)

### *Contribution to Intracouple Conflict*

Changes in men's and women's household roles and responsibilities brought about by women's entrance into the labor force coupled with women's sense of empowerment and men's feelings of being disrespected produced significant conflict within couples. Several of these conflicts were situated in the new complexities in daily life that accompany life in a dual-earner household. The fact that a woman who works outside the home is not as available to her partner when he returns from work caused friction for some couples. Bringing home problems or frustrations from work can leave a couple ready for conflict as soon as they walk through the door.

We have had arguments. We have fought because, like I told you already, there in Mexico, she stayed at home. And now that we both work here, she has to work more hours at her job. And that bothers me because when I get home, she still hasn't arrived. (7-16-03, male participant)

The conflicts with your partner begin sometimes because of the job, sometimes because of the manager who demands a lot at work, and sometimes they get home in a bad mood. And sometimes that's when you react also, sometimes aggressively. (6-30-03, female participant)

One source of potential conflict described by both men and women in the study was that of overlapping work schedules and subsequent implications for household management, meal preparation, and caring for children. Women often worked the same hours as their partners yet were somehow expected to have managed all the household tasks as well during the same time period. Men arrived home to find all the household chores remaining

to be done and the children needing care and wondered why things were not under control. Men also expressed frustration because their attempts to engage in household activities were sometimes met with what they perceived to be heavy criticism from their wives or partners. The women resented their partners' assumption that they would have taken care of everything despite having been at work, and confrontations often escalated into arguments. The traditional division of labor learned in Mexico left women and men poorly prepared to confront these new issues and role expectations, thereby contributing to stress in the relationship.

He feels bad being here in the house taking care of everything, helping me cook, and sometimes, when I get home from work, I find him all stressed out. And a lot of the time, we argue for this reason. (9-16-03, female participant)

And so then, she makes me hit her. Well, she doesn't make me hit her and I shouldn't hit her. But she yells at me too much. I help out a lot in my house. And that bothers me because I know that in the majority of the Mexican marriages this doesn't happen. (9-09-03, male participant)

Managing two sets of earnings was another complexity of daily life that accompanied women's entrance into the labor force. When the man was bringing in all the income, there was little room for debate over how the money should be spent and by whom. Having her own money to spend meant that the woman could come and go as she pleased and buy whatever she wanted without having to consult her partner. The money he earned was for the household, whereas the money she earned was "her money" to be spent as she wished. Some women chose to spend their money on discretionary items for themselves and their children without prior consultation with their partner, a fact that some men resented. The interviews highlighted tensions around how her money was spent and how household spending decisions were made.

I hardly ever saw her and when she got her check, we seldom sat down and discussed what we were going to do with the money. And that's when we would start to argue. As the head of the household, it makes me feel bad. (7-16-03, male participant)

Sometimes we argue because she now has her own money, and she wants to go and buy whatever she wants to. And I don't like that, but I've realized that she has her own money and she can do as she pleases. (7-26-03, male participant)

Finally, the expanded social networks that resulted from women's entrance into the labor force created two distinct sources of conflict within couples. First, both women and men reported that women acquired new ideas and views about how couples should behave through interactions with other women in the workplace as well as elsewhere. When these ideas and views were brought into the relationship, women were accused of abandoning cultural norms. The second source of conflict reflected the possessiveness that Mexican men have over their spouses or partners. Both women and men relayed intense

descriptions of men's jealousy when they observed their wives or partners interacting with male coworkers.

When a woman works here, after a while she gets used to other customs and she feels free. And when everything gets out of control, it's all because the man starts with his ideas from Mexico. . . . He says, "No, you've changed since you came to this country." But it's not the country; it's the circumstances that you find yourself in. (9-05-03, female participant)

I screwed up because I asked a [male] coworker for a ride . . . because there was no one else left at work. . . . I think that my mistake was in telling my husband who had brought me home, but I did it because I didn't have anything to hide. I didn't have anything going on with that man. But it would have been better if I hadn't done it because it was one more fight that we had. (8-15-03, female participant)

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

This study was designed to explore how women's participation in the workforce may serve as an agent of acculturation and subsequently shape conflict dynamics within Mexican immigrants' intimate partnerships. Drawing on calls by acculturation scholars to focus on specific experiences and elements of culture (Escobar & Vega, 2000; Hunt et al., 2004), we conducted in-depth interviews with 20 immigrant women and men from Mexico. Analyses of these data indicated that women's employment, an experience that is necessitated by high costs of living in the United States and men's low-wage employment (Bernal & Enchautegui-de-Jesus, 1994), creates a variety of circumstances that challenge the customary roles and behaviors for women and men found in Mexican culture. Both the challenges to Mexican culture and the way women and men respond to them created sources of conflict within participants' intimate relationships. Although this general conclusion is consistent with previous research suggesting acculturation contributes to conflict and strain in immigrant women's and men's intimate relationships (Flores et al., 2004; Frias & Angel, 2005; Harris et al., 2005; Lown & Vega, 2001; Menjivar & Salcido, 2002; Negy & Snyder, 1997, 2000), the results of this study extend previous research in several ways.

The results of this study put a finer point on discussions of how acculturation contributes to conflict in intimate relationships. Although previous research argues that life in the United States challenges gender-role norms of Mexican immigrants (Harris et al., 2005; Jasinski, 1998), few studies have been able to identify what those specific challenges look like in immigrants' daily lives (cf. Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992). The results of this study indicate that women's employment in the United States creates at least three distinct challenges to gender-based beliefs and values held in Mexican culture and places stress on the relationship. First, women's employment outside the home meant that the men could no longer rely on their partners to have taken care of all the household tasks in the manner to which they were accustomed in Mexico. As has been documented in previous research (Ybarra, 1982), men knew that they would need to contribute more to household activities,

such as cooking and caring for children. However, the men in this study were relatively unaccustomed and unprepared to undertake these activities, and they resented having to do what they considered to be women's work (Coltrane & Valdez, 1993). Furthermore, the mere fact that the women had to work outside the home for financial security was perceived by some men, perhaps because of machismo, as demeaning to their roles as men and primary breadwinners, and it exacerbated their frustration.

Women's earnings from their work created a second challenge to gender-based beliefs and values held in Mexican culture. Women's employment and earnings made them feel less trapped, as they were no longer financially dependent on their partners. Women also felt more empowered (Meleis et al., 1996) and independent of their partners when making financial decisions for themselves and their children, which upset men who were accustomed to having complete control over the family's finances. Although we cannot discern from our data whether men's reactions reflect true frivolous spending on the part of women, or men's struggle to maintain authority over finances, the pattern of results is consistent with previous research indicating that conflict related to finances increases as women become more acculturated (Flores et al., 2004). Finally, employment expands women's opportunities to interact with other women and men, and it fundamentally alters women's relationships with their husbands or partners.

Regardless of whether it arose from men's participation in women's activities such as housework, women's outright challenge to a traditionally male responsibility such as financial management, or men's emotional reactions to observing their wives or partners interacting with unrelated men, women's employment creates new circumstances that threaten previously clear-cut behavior patterns for women and men. These threats to culturally held norms were described as sources of conflict within intimate relationships because of an apparent absence of clear models for negotiating new roles and experiences.

The refined view of how women's employment after migration contributes to acculturative processes has both theoretical and practical implications. The results of this study provide the foundation for building refined theories of acculturation and how it shapes family processes, such as conflict, because it provides evidence of the specific element of culture that is threatened by everyday life in the United States (i.e., male-female roles, responsibilities, and expectations) as well as concrete indicators of change or circumstances that may precede episodes of conflict (e.g., argument over financial decisions, men's frustration that women were no longer handling all the household chores). Each of these is essential for designing future studies that include appropriate measures for advancing theory building around the role of acculturation as it contributes to family outcomes, such as conflict among intimate partners (Escobar & Vega, 2000; Hunt et al., 2004).

The results of this research also have practical implications because they point to specific areas where immigrants may need assistance in adapting to life in the United States. Primary and secondary interventions need to target real situations in everyday life that trigger conflict. The results of this study suggest that interventions focused on family financial decision making or strategies for managing the complexities of a two-earner household may minimize sources of conflict within relationships and contribute to stronger and better functioning families.

This study's focus on both women's and men's acculturative experiences surrounding women's entrance into the labor force also contributes to the literature by highlighting gaps in women's and men's accounts of common experiences. Consider, for example, our results suggesting that decision making over how wives' earnings will be allocated contributes to conflict in immigrant couples. Of course, it is possible that men were explicitly trying to exert control over their wives; however, recognizing that men in Mexican culture are primarily responsible for family financial security, it is entirely possible that women's newfound financial independence created a sense that "her money" is hers and his money is "theirs," thereby leaving men to wrestle with the hardship of providing even basic necessities for the family. Likewise, our results suggesting that women were critical of men's attempts at household tasks could reflect either weak or counterproductive attempts on the part of men to assist women or overly harsh appraisals by women who, again through the lens of Mexican culture, are responsible for maintaining standards for household maintenance and child rearing. These examples illustrate the importance of capturing both partners' experiences when studying inherently dyadic phenomena, such as conflict within intimate relations.

A final contribution of this study is evidence suggesting asymmetry among women and men in the rate of acculturation. These results are consistent with earlier research (Flores et al., 2004; Negy & Snyder, 1997), but our results offer a more refined glimpse into the processes underlying the correlations observed in the previous research. Specifically, the implications of women's entrance into paid employment were experienced in notably different ways by the men and women in this study. Men spoke of issues specific to the relationship that resulted from their partners leaving the house to go to work: frustration that they needed to engage in more household and child care tasks, jealousy when their wives or partners interacted with other unrelated men, and anger that wives did not give them the same amount of attention. In contrast, women spoke about the empowerment they felt as a result of working and the inherent rights provided by the earnings they contributed to the household. Their responses had less to do with their beliefs about how men are or should be and more about their new rights in the relationship as a result of the changing roles. Underlying these differences is a theme suggesting that women are more open than men to abandoning roles and behaviors for women and men customary in Mexican culture. Alternatively, put in Berry's (2004) typology of acculturation strategy, our results suggest that women may be more likely to assimilate, whereas men attempt to resist acculturation. This finding was obtained in a region of the country with recent growth in the immigrant population vis-à-vis areas of the country where the finding has been documented previously (e.g., Texas and California; Flores et al., 2004; Negy & Snyder, 1997), suggesting that gender asymmetry in acculturation may not be influenced by the strength of immigrants' receiving communities.

Despite the contributions of this study, it also has limitations that must be recognized. First, it is important to remind readers that all study participants were believed to be currently or recently involved in a violent intimate relationship. It is therefore not clear whether the patterns observed in this study are unique to conflict dynamics among individuals in violent relationships. Next, the data in this study were obtained from uncoupled men and women: Participants were not discussing shared relationships. Although it would

have been preferable to obtain the perspectives of partners in the same relationship, given that the purpose of the overarching project was to study violence within couples, such an approach would not have been feasible for reasons of safety and confidentiality to study participants. Next, because all study participants were from Mexico, the results of this study may not generalize to other immigrant Latino populations. The results of this study may have limited generalizability because they may reflect the relatively unique circumstances of Mexican immigrants in North Carolina, a state that has only recently experienced growth in the Latino population. Indeed, our results suggesting the lack of egalitarianism in Mexican marriages differs from previous research undertaken in regions of the country with well-established Mexican communities (e.g., California; Coltrane et al., 2004; Ybarra, 1982). Finally, given the small sample size, it is unknown how well the results of this study generalize to the broader population of immigrants in western North Carolina.

Limitations notwithstanding, the results of this study provide a unique and significant contribution to the understanding of acculturation among Mexican immigrants and how it shapes conflict within intimate relationships and perhaps other family processes. The results suggest that women's entrance into the labor force following migration initiates a variety of changes within intimate relationships that challenge roles and behaviors for women and men customary in Mexican culture. Foremost among these challenges is men's greater involvement in household activities as immigrant couples attempt to accommodate a two-earner household, greater demands on the part of women to be involved in financial decision making, and men's jealousy resulting from their wives' or partners' greater opportunity to interact with other men in the workplace. Although additional research is needed, the results of this study contribute to a better understanding of acculturation among immigrant couples from Mexico because they identify a specific element of culture that is threatened by everyday life in the United States, and they highlight discrete circumstances that may contribute to conflict within families.

### Authors' Note

We are grateful to Dr. Angela Hattery for her assistance in this project.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article: The research was supported by an intramural collaborative grant between Wake Forest University and Wake Forest University School of Medicine.

### References

- Arcury, T. A., & Quandt, S. A. (1998). Qualitative methods in arthritis research: Sampling and data analysis. *Arthritis Care and Research, 11*, 66-74.
- Baker, P. L. (2004). "It is the only way I can survive": Gender paradox among recent Mexican immigrants to Iowa. *Sociological Perspectives, 47*, 393-408.

- Bernal, G., & Enchautegui-de-Jesus, N. (1994). Latinos and Latinas in community psychology: A review of the literature. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 22, 531-557.
- Bernard, H. R. (2002). *Research methods in anthropology: Qualitative and quantitative approaches* (3rd ed.). Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press.
- Berry, J. W. (2004). Acculturation. In C. Spielberger (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of applied psychology* (Vol. 1, pp. 27-34). San Diego, CA: Elsevier/Academic Press.
- Casas, J. M., & Ortiz, S. (1985). Exploring the applicability of the Dyadic Adjustment Scale for assessing level of marital adjustment with Mexican Americans. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 47, 1023-1027.
- Cerrutti, M., & Massey, D. S. (2001). On the auspices of female migration from Mexico to the United States. *Demography*, 38, 187-200.
- Coltrane, S. (2000). Research on household labor: Modeling and measuring the social embeddedness of routine family work. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 62, 1208-1233.
- Coltrane, S., Parke, R. D., & Adams, M. (2004). Complexity of father involvement in low-income Mexican American families. *Family Relations*, 53, 179-189.
- Coltrane, S., & Valdez, E. O. (1993). Reluctant compliance: Work-family role allocation in dual-earner Chicano families. In J. C. Hood (Ed.), *Men, work, and family* (pp. 151-175). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Dion, K. K., & Dion, K. L. (2001). Gender and cultural adaptation in immigrant families. *Journal of Social Issues*, 57, 511-521.
- Escobar, J. I., Hoyos Nervi, C., & Gara, M. A. (2000). Immigration and mental health: Mexican Americans in the United States. *Harvard Review of Psychiatry*, 8, 64-72.
- Escobar, J. I., & Vega, W. A. (2000). Mental health and immigration's AAAs: Where are we and where do we go from here? *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disorders*, 188, 736-740.
- Firestone, J. M., Harris, R. J., & Vega, W. A. (2003). The impact of gender role ideology, male expectancies, and acculturation on wife abuse. *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, 26, 549-564.
- Flores, E., Tschann, J. M., Marin, B. V., & Pantoja, P. (2004). Marital conflict and acculturation among Mexican American husbands and wives. *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 10, 39-52.
- Frias, S. M., & Angel, R. J. (2005). The risk of partner violence among low-income Hispanic subgroups. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 67, 552-564.
- Glass, J., & Fujimoto, T. (1994). Housework, paid work, and depression among husbands and wives. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 35, 179-191.
- Guzmán, B., & McConnell, E. D. (2002). The Hispanic population: 1990-2000 growth and change. *Population Research and Public Policy Review*, 21, 109-128.
- Harris, R. J., Firestone, J. M., & Vega, W. A. (2005). The interaction of country of origin, acculturation, and gender role ideology on wife abuse. *Social Science Quarterly*, 86, 463-483.
- Hawkes, G. R., & Taylor, M. (1975). Power structure in Mexican and Mexican-American farm labor families. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 37, 807-811.
- Hochschild, A. R. (1997). *The time bind: When work becomes home and home becomes work*. New York: Metropolitan Books.
- Hondagneu-Sotelo, P. (1992). Overcoming patriarchal constraints: The reconstruction of gender relations among Mexican immigrant women and men. *Gender & Society*, 6, 393-415.

- Hunt, L. M., Schneider, S., & Comer, B. (2004). Should "acculturation" be a variable in health research? A critical review of research on U.S. Hispanics. *Social Science & Medicine*, *59*, 973-986.
- Jacobs, J. A., & Gerson, K. (2001). Overworked individuals or overworked families?: Explaining trends in work, leisure, and family time. *Work and Occupations*, *28*, 40-63.
- Jasinski, J. L. (1998). The role of acculturation in wife assault. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, *20*, 175-191.
- Komter, A. (1989). Hidden power in marriage. *Gender & Society*, *3*, 187-216.
- Lichter, D. T., & Landale, N. S. (1995). Parental work, family structure, and poverty among Latino children. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *57*, 346-354.
- Lown, E. A., & Vega, W. A. (2001). Intimate partner violence and health: Self-assessed health, chronic health, and somatic symptoms among Mexican American women. *Psychosomatic Medicine*, *63*, 352-360.
- Matthews, S. H. (2005). Crafting qualitative research articles on marriages and families. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *67*, 799-808.
- Mederer, H. J. (1993). Division of labor in two-earner homes: Task accomplishment versus household management as critical variables in perceptions about family work. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *55*, 133-145.
- Meleis, A. I., Douglas, M. K., Eribes, C., Shih, F., & Messias, D. K. (1996). Employed Mexican women as mothers and partners: Valued, empowered, and overloaded. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, *23*, 82-90.
- Menjivar, C. (1999). The intersection of work and gender: Central American immigrant women and employment in California. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *42*, 601-627.
- Menjivar, C., & Salcido, O. (2002). Immigrant women and domestic violence: Common experiences in different countries. *Gender & Society*, *16*, 898-920.
- Muhr, T., & Friese, S. (2004). *User's manual for ATLAS.ti 5.0* (2nd ed.). Berlin: Scientific Software Development.
- Negy, C., & Snyder, D. K. (1997). Ethnicity and acculturation: Assessing Mexican American couples' relationships using the Marital Satisfaction Inventory-Revised. *Psychological Assessment*, *9*, 414-421.
- Negy, C., & Snyder, D. K. (2000). Relationship satisfaction of Mexican American and non-Hispanic White American interethnic couples: Issues of acculturation and clinical intervention. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, *26*, 293-304.
- Parrado, E. A., & Zenteno, R. M. (2001). Economic restructuring, financial crises, and women's work in Mexico. *Social Problems*, *48*, 456-477.
- Roxburgh, S. (2004). "There just aren't enough hours in the day": The mental health consequences of time pressure. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, *45*, 115-131.
- Shelton, B. A., & John, D. (1996). The division of household labor. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *22*, 299-322.
- Spitze, G. (1988). Women's employment and family relations: A review. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *50*, 595-618.
- Staples, R., & Mirande, A. (1980). Racial and cultural variations among American families: A decennial review of the literature on minority families. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *42*, 887-903.

- Vega, W. A. (1990). Hispanic families in the 1980s: A decade of research. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 52, 1015-1024.
- World Bank. (2005). *World development indicators* (Section 2, People, Table 2.2). Retrieved July 19, 2005, from <http://devdata.worldbank.org/wdi2005/Section2.htm>
- Ybarra, L. (1982). When wives work: The impact on the Chicano family. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 44, 169-178.

## Bios

**Joseph G. Grzywacz**, PhD, is associate professor of family and community medicine at Wake Forest University School of Medicine. His research focuses on adults' everyday work and family experiences and how these experiences affect physical and mental health.

**Pamela Rao**, PhD, is a medical anthropologist with research interests in environmental issues in maternal and child health. She is currently a migrant health specialist/research analyst with Farmworker Justice, a national nonprofit that advocates for improved working and living conditions for farmworkers. She was formerly an assistant professor in the Department of Family and Community Medicine at Wake Forest University School of Medicine.

**Amanda Gentry**, BA, is currently a graduate student of health behavior and health education in the School of Public Health at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her research interests include women's health and health disparities. She was formerly a research project staff member in the Department of Family and Community Medicine at Wake Forest University School of Medicine.

**Antonio Marín**, MA, is a research associate in the Department of Family and Community Medicine at Wake Forest University School of Medicine. His research interests focus on the distress and loneliness caused by family separation among Latino immigrants.

**Thomas A. Arcury**, PhD, is professor and vice chair for research in the Department of Family and Community Medicine at Wake Forest University School of Medicine. He is a cultural anthropologist whose research focuses on ethnic and minority health, particularly the health of immigrant Latino farmworkers.