

Maintaining intergenerational solidarity in Mexican transnational families

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## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Joon-Sik Kim and Hae-Jin Hwang. Their devotion to my education and endless amount of love and support has helped me to reach one part of my educational goal. I would also like to dedicate this thesis to my teachers in Korea, Dr. Sook-Hee Jung and Dr. Sung-Man Shin. Their continuous attention and support helped me to finish this thesis successfully.

## **Abstract**

This study explored how Mexican transnational families maintain intergenerational relationships among adult children in the U.S. and their parents in Mexico across borders using five dimensions of intergenerational solidarity theory. Interviews with 13 adult migrant children from Mexico and their parents were analyzed to explore their unique challenges and efforts to maintain intergenerational solidarity in a transnational context. The results showed that a great distance across national borders between generations, adult children's lack of documentation for freely visiting Mexico, and less accessibility between family members limited maintaining intergenerational relationships in a transnational context. In spite of these challenges, these transnational families made effort to maintain intergenerational solidarity by making contacts frequently, giving financial supports to parents, expressing love, support, and concern to each other, cooperating with siblings in Mexico for maintaining the intergenerational solidarity across borders. In this process, Mexican families' cultural norm that emphasized the importance of family provided strong motivation to maintain connections between adult children and their parents across borders.

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## **Introduction**

International migration is a growing phenomenon resulting in family systems in which members live outside their home countries while others remain in the country of origin. Increasingly, these family forms are referred as transnational families.

Transnational families are defined as “families that live some or most of the time separated from each other, yet hold together and create something that can be seen as a feeling of collective welfare and unity, namely family hood, even across national borders” (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002, p. 3). Many people become transnational families for financial reason, employment, quality of life or religious reason (Kodwo-Nyameazea & Nguyen, 2008; Parrenas, 2005; Senyurekli & Detzner, 2008). Though they live across borders, these families make efforts to maintain their family ties using advanced communication technology and affordable transportation (Nesteruk & Marks, 2009).

According to Mexican Immigrants in the United States (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009), 12.7 million Mexican immigrants live in the U.S. and account for 32% of all immigrants living in America. A typical transnational family pattern resulting from migration from Mexico is that one family member moves to the United States to find a job. Once employment is secured, the migrant worker remits money to her or his family on a regular basis. Often however, the migrant workers remain separated from their families for extended periods of time often years pass before they are able to meet face-to-face again. This situation presents important challenges to Mexican transnational families, due to their strong emphasis on interdependence among extended family members

(Falicov, 2001). Therefore, transnational Mexican families make extensive effort to maintain their connections with family members across borders in spite of their transnational context.

A few recent studies have explored how U.S. immigrants from the Philippines, Turkey, and Ghana maintain their family ties with family members in their country of origin (Kodwo-Nyameazea & Nguyen, 2008; Parrenas, 2005; Senyurekli & Detzner, 2008). However, while Mexicans constitute a significant proportion of the U.S. immigrant population, little attention has been paid to how Mexican people maintain family ties that span borders. Therefore, this study aims to fill the literature gap by examining the intergenerational relationship in Mexico-U.S. transnational families. More specifically, the focus of this paper is on the relationships between parents in Mexico and their adult children in the U.S. Using Bengston and Roberts' (1991) intergenerational solidarity theoretical framework, the present study explored how Mexican families maintain intergenerational solidarity in a transnational context.

### **Theoretical framework: Intergenerational solidarity theory**

Intergenerational solidarity theory explains patterns of solidarity among parents and adult children during the adult family life course to explore how families are connected. It is defined as “intergenerational cohesion after children reach adulthood and establish careers and families of their own” (Bengston & Roberts, 1991, p. 856). The earliest social theorists defined solidarity as a union of interests, purpose, or sympathies among members of a group that contributes to general integration of society (Durkheim,

1933). The importance of group norms, functional interdependence, and consensus among group members were emphasized as important factors of solidarity (Durkheim, 1933). More recently, family theorists attempted to apply the concept of solidarity observed in groups to a family because a family was considered a type of small group (McChesney & Bengston, 1988). Based on the previous studies, the concept of solidarity was expanded by Bengston and Roberts (1991) to explore how families are connected across generations.

Intergenerational solidarity theory is multidimensional and is reflected in six elements of parent-child interaction: structural solidarity, associational solidarity, functional solidarity, affectual solidarity, normative solidarity, and consensual solidarity (Bengston & Roberts, 1991). *Structural solidarity* refers to the structures providing or constricting opportunities for interaction between generations such as physical proximity between generations, number of siblings, and health of family members. *Associational solidarity* represents the frequency and patterns of contacts between generations. *Functional solidarity* is realized through help and support provided the exchange of resources among family members. *Affectual solidarity* depicts the type and degree of closeness and positive sentiment among family members. *Normative solidarity* stands for attitudes about the importance of family and values related to helping and supporting family members. *Consensual solidarity* refers to the degree of agreement on attitudes and values between generations. The interconnectedness of these six dimensions in intergenerational solidarity was tested by Bengston and Roberts (1991). The results of their study revealed that levels of normative solidarity were positively related to levels of

affectual solidarity and associational solidarity between generations. Greater opportunity for interaction between generations was also found to be positively related to associational solidarity.

Mangen and McChesney (1988) developed 13 typologies of families based on four of the six dimensions of intergenerational solidarity: structural, associational, functional, and affectual solidarity. Two of their thirteen typologies are related to transnational families, specifically the two labeled as “The Geographical Distant” types. Mangen and McChesney (1988) concluded their study with a suggestion that future research use qualitative approaches to explore families that have unique patterns of solidarity such as transnational families. This study aims to fill that gap by using the lens of intergenerational solidarity theory to understand how transnational Mexican-U.S. families maintain intergenerational family relationships.

## **Review of the Literature**

The following is a review of recent empirical studies on intergenerational relationships in transnational families and Mexican families. While most of these studies did not explicitly use the intergenerational solidarity theory as the basis for their research, parallels to the five dimensions of the theory will be drawn. The literature review is organized in four sections: maintaining family relationships at a geographical distance, maintaining family relationships through technological means, maintaining family relationships through sending remittances, and maintaining cultural norms in Mexican families.

**Maintaining family relationships at a geographical distance: Structural solidarity**

Several studies have documented the important influence of geographical proximity on maintaining intergenerational relationships and the difficulty in maintaining intergenerational relationships when families are separated by distance. Results of a study by Sands and Roer-Strier (2004) showed that U.S. based American mothers with daughters who moved to Israel for religious reasons experienced difficulties accepting their daughter's immigration over time. The study used qualitative data from interviews with 14 Israeli American daughters who became Orthodox and moved to Israel and their 14 respective American mothers. A primary source of their dissatisfaction was that mothers had less contact with their daughters and grandchildren and were deprived of close support from their daughters. These mothers reported the feeling of loss and pain.

Children who leave for other countries also experience similar loss of connection with their parents. A study of adult children who left Turkey to live in the U.S. felt ambivalence about how their connections with their parents changed after their relocation to a new country (Senyurekli & Detzer, 2008). The study used qualitative data from 28 Turkish immigrants to explore how intergenerational relationships were experienced in a transnational context. Results showed that these immigrants experience significant structural and associational changes in their intergenerational relationship. While living in the U.S., they called or visited less frequently than before and experienced a decrease in the level of closeness with their parents back home. The study concluded that these changes generated ambivalence in intergenerational relationships.

**Maintaining family relationships through technological means: Associational solidarity**

While geographic distance makes it challenging for families to maintain strong family ties, transnational families find ways to do so on a regular basis. New communication technologies have increased the frequency of interaction and helped to maintain emotional bonds among family members across countries (Baldassar, 2007). Wilding (2006) examined how transnational families maintained contact across time and space. Using qualitative data from immigrants living in Perth and Australia whose parents resided in Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Singapore, and Iran, results revealed that they used a wide variety of methods to maintain contact including telephone calls, telegrams, letters, faxes, email, internet chat rooms, internet websites, mobile text messages, videos, tapes, gifts, cards, postcards. Parrena (2005) found Filipino migrant mothers made contact with their children in the Philippines at least once a week using telephone or e-mail.

Visiting is another way for families to maintain their relationships. Wilding and Baldassar (2009) explained how adult children in Australia cared for aging parents in Italy and Ireland through frequent visits. The study used qualitative data from 50 Italian and Irish migrants living in Australia to discuss the extent and types of care and support exchanges between migrants and parents in a transnational context. The results showed that Italian and Irish migrants, especially women, often visited their parents. Further, they were always financially prepared in case they needed to make an emergency visit related to their parents' health problems.

However, visiting is not always possible in transnational families. Menjivar's (2002) study examined the possibilities for transnational activities among 1.5 generation

(children who were born in Guatemala and raised in the U.S.) and second generation Guatemalan children living in Los Angeles. Results showed that even though parents in the study made efforts to keep their children connected to their places of origin, Guatemalan-born children had less opportunity to connect to their place of origin than U.S.-born children. Unlike their U.S.-born counterparts, 1.5 generation children were often undocumented and experienced barriers to travel to their country of origin to visit family members.

### **Maintaining family relationships through sending remittances: Functional and affectual solidarity**

Family members who relocate to the United States often send money home to parents and other family members. The term used for this financial support is remittances. Remittances are a way of supporting and maintaining relations in transnational families. In a study by Wilding and Baldassar (2009), Italian and Irish migrant men often chose to provide financial support to parents in Italy or Ireland as a strategy for maintaining intergenerational relationships. In Kodwo-Nyameazea and Nguyen's (2008) research, Ghanaian adult children in the U.S also cared for aging parents in Ghana through remittances. Using qualitative data from five Ghanaian immigrants residing in the U.S., this study explored how they provide care and support to older adult relatives in Ghana. Results showed that Ghanaian immigrants sent remittances for parents or grandparents in Ghana. Their parents or grandparents used the remittances to pay medical bills or maintain and build houses in Ghana. These Ghanaian adult children claimed that providing care for their aging parents was their way of showing

solidarity in the family; it was a means of expressing respect and appreciation to parents who had provided support in the past.

### **Maintaining cultural norms in Mexican families: Normative solidarity**

Many transnational families strive to keep their cultural norms of origin. Nesteruk and Marks (2009) used qualitative data to examine how Eastern European immigrants maintained relationships with their parents and extended family in their country of origin. Results showed that Eastern European transnational families also maintained their beliefs and cultural norms which emphasized family connection and interdependence.

No studies were found that explicitly studied how the cultural norm of family interdependence is maintained in Mexican transnational families. However, studies of Latino families provide evidence that this value persists across time and space.

Falicov's (2001) study suggested that Latino families emphasized interdependence by providing support to family members. Giving financial support, living together and providing emotional advice most often reflected interdependence among family members. Intergenerational connectedness has still remained strong in Latino families, though they are often physically separated in modern society (Falicov, 2001).

In conclusion, this literature review revealed important ways that families maintain intergenerational relationships. It was clear that while transnational families face unique challenges in maintaining those relationships across geographic distances, they find ways to do so. While the studies reviewed were not explicitly grounded in the intergenerational solidarity theory, they provided evidence of the importance of and

challenges to maintaining intergenerational relationships in a transnational context. Moreover, evidence of five of the six dimensions of intergenerational solidarity theory – structural, associational, function, affectual, and normative solidarity – were found in the literature review, though not explicitly named. Therefore the purpose of this study was to explicitly apply the lens of intergenerational solidarity theory to a) identify examples of intergenerational solidarity between adult migrant children in the U.S. and their parents in Mexico, and b) to identify challenges to maintaining intergenerational solidarity in the Mexico-U.S. transnational family context.

## **Method**

### **Dataset**

This study was based on secondary data collected in 2007-2008 for a research project titled Mexican Agricultural Workers in Minnesota: A Study of Transnational Work and Family Issues. The research was supported by the National Food and Agricultural Institute International Science and Education Program.

The sample included 19 Mexican agriculture workers in Minnesota and 17 family members in Mexico. Minnesota-based workers were recruited by University of Minnesota Extension educators who had respected relationships in the Latino community. Eligible participants a) were employed in agriculture-related jobs, b) were supporting family members in Mexico, and c) had at least one family member in Mexico willing to be interviewed. A snowball sampling procedure was used to find eligible participants.

Extension educators contacted potential participants personally to establish their eligibility and to provide assurance that their participation would be kept confidential. After the Minnesota interview, immigrants contacted a family member in Mexico to request their participation. Subsequently, the Mexico-based researchers contacted the family member in Mexico. Only two identified family members in Mexico were either unable to be contacted or did not want to be interviewed. They did not systematically differ from the remaining 17 dyads. Initial consent was established at first contact by phone and actual consent was obtained before the in-person interview.

Native Spanish speakers in Minnesota and Mexico conducted the 60 - 90 semi-structured interviews that focused on family descriptions, the immigration experience, the immigrants' work environments, remittance and family allocation decisions, family relationships, quality of life, goals and dreams. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed in Spanish and translated into English. Transcripts were checked for accuracy by bilingual researcher team members. The process of translation verification was done by reading and analyzing in both Spanish by native Spanish speaker researchers and in English by native English speaker researchers. After analysis in each language, the researchers verified translation accuracy.

### **Sample description**

The sample for this study was the 13 adult children-parent pairs from the larger study. The adult children from Mexico were working in agricultural enterprises in Minnesota and were sending remittances to support their parents in Mexico. Parents who received remittances in Mexico from their adult children in Minnesota were mainly

interviewed but in cases of ill health or reluctance to speak, another family member was interviewed.

Adult children in this study were born in Mexico and currently resided in rural areas in southeastern Minnesota. Parents in Mexico lived in six different states and eleven different towns. Among them, seven parents lived in urban areas and six parents lived in rural areas.

The Minnesota-based sample included five females and eight males. Their average age was 40 years, ranging from 27 to 50. One adult child held a university degree, three had graduated from high school, four graduated from middle school, two finished elementary and three had less than elementary or an unknown level of education. Ten of the adult children were married and three were single, divorced, or widowed. The average age of parents in Mexico was 74 years, ranging from 48 to 88. The names of the interviewees had been changed to protect their privacy.

### **Data analysis**

A deductive qualitative data analysis process used an existing conceptual model to arrive at a better set of concepts and hypotheses by testing, refining, and refuting it (Gilgun, 2005). In the case of this study, intergenerational solidarity theory was used to examine intergenerational family relationship in a transnational context.

First the researcher read the interviews several times and found excerpts from text that related to the six dimensions of intergenerational solidarity- structural solidarity, associational solidarity, functional solidarity, affectual solidarity, normative solidarity, and consensual solidarity. Nominal definition of each dimension in Bengston and

Roberts's study (1991) was used as the criteria for judgment of finding excerpts from text that represent examples of each dimension. Selected excerpts were included, not only general examples of each dimension, but also unique examples or challenges of each dimension that Mexican transnational families experienced. For example, functional solidarity was defined as degree of helping and exchanges of resources in Bengston and Roberts's (1991) study. Thus the researcher included excerpts that related to not only the exchange of financial resources but also the lack of physical assistance among generations because these represented examples and challenges of helping and exchanges of resources between adult migrant children and their parents in Mexican transnational families. NVivo 8 software (2008) was used to organize the selected excerpts by the six dimensions.

In this process, excerpts for each dimension were checked by two of the original researchers to assure the excerpts accurately reflected the respective theoretical dimensions. Disagreements among researchers were discussed for clarification. Consensual solidarity was excluded in the process because the researcher found there was not enough narrative text to support this dimension of intergenerational solidarity.

Once there was agreement that the interview text was accurately coded for each solidarity dimension, the researcher read each dimension for prominent themes. The selected excerpts from interviews were labeled and categorized to find dominant themes that captured the common characteristics of each dimension in Mexican transnational families. By categorizing excerpts for common themes in each dimension, 10 themes were found in this study. Themes within solidarity dimensions were also discussed with

two of the original study researchers to assure their clarity by questioning about the process of categorizing.

### **Trustworthiness of the study**

Trustworthiness in qualitative research refers to the standards used to protect the quality and accuracy of the data (Morrow, 2005). While internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity are used to measure trustworthiness in quantitative studies, credibility and trustworthiness in qualitative are evaluated through transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Credibility in this study was achieved through the process of peer debriefing. Data coded for the six dimensions of intergenerational solidarity and subsequent themes within each dimension were discussed with two researchers involved in the original study. Transferability was achieved in this study by providing a detailed description of the study sample and the context in which the data were collected. Dependability and confirmability was achieved by giving exact and detailed quotations from respondents which help readers to better identify with the adult children and their family who participated in the study. The researcher also kept a research notebook to record ideas and decision makings and these were discussed in research group meetings. Results were checked for clarity of solidarity dimensions by asking a colleague to independently use dimension descriptions to find relevant text.

## Results

Five of the six dimensions of intergenerational solidarity were found in this study of adult children in the U.S. and their parents in Mexico- structural solidarity, associational solidarity, functional solidarity, affectual solidarity, and normative solidarity. In the following sections, evidence of each dimension of solidarity will be presented along with examples of how the transnational family context created challenges to solidarity.

### **Structural solidarity**

According to Bengtson and Roberts (1991), structural solidarity depicts the structures constricting or providing opportunities for interaction between generations. Three primary themes were found for this dimension of international solidarity. The first theme represents a constricting opportunity for interaction –living in two countries. The other two themes, siblings in Mexico and parents’ health problems, represent an opportunity for interaction between adult children in Minnesota and their parents in Mexico.

#### **Living in two countries: “*We choose to live in two countries so we can have better opportunities*”**

Living in two countries was the primary constricting opportunity that limited interaction between generations. Mexican transnational families resided in two countries; adult children had migrated to the U.S and their parents had remained in Mexico.

The critical lack of economic opportunity was the primary reason family members left Mexico to seek work in the United States. Critical situations in Mexico led adult children to look for better quality of life and to have access to economic opportunities for success. Adult children shared they had experienced difficulties finding jobs in Mexico. Parents commented regarding the lack of jobs in Mexico.

There is no money, well, there wasn't, for example, my sons, here, sometimes they work two or three days a week, sometimes they work the whole week and sometimes they don't work a single day. There have been weeks when they didn't work at all. (Gaby, Mother, 59, Mexico)

You keep looking for a bit of economic stability and you want to offer your family a decent life... Because of the same reason, looking for stability, for quietness, which is what you try to have, to keep a balance, to earn what you think your work is worth, depending on the kind of knowledge you have. We also came for that reason, to give our daughters a better education. (Pablo, Son, 30, Minnesota)

Though living in two countries gave them fewer opportunities to interact with parents, adult children in the U.S. wanted to maintain their strong family ties. Adult children hoped to stay connected with parents emotionally, while staying satisfied with their life in the U.S. Family members in Mexico wanted their family members in the U.S to stay there since they were well aware of the economic challenges in Mexico. A son whose parents lived in Mexico expressed his hope to continue staying in the U.S.

Yes, but if I have the chance of living here, legally, being able to visit my relatives in Mexico, well, that would be fine, maybe I can see that dream of having my own business become real here, living here.... We live with more comfort, we are better off, without the tension that means not knowing if you can make ends meet. (Javier, Son, 42, Minnesota)

A sister in Mexico also suggested that her brother should stay in the U.S. to realize his goal:

I have told him that he shouldn't come back, that it is all right with the little money he could send to my father, because here expenses are high and what we earn is never enough, because there is no work, and so I say to him: "You should struggle to achieve something (over there)". (Janet, Sister, 48, Mexico)

**Siblings in Mexico: *"My siblings in Mexico take care of my parents and I support them financially"***

Migrants' siblings in Mexico were important to maintaining intergenerational solidarity in the transnational context, serving as a conduit between parents in Mexico and the migrant in the U.S. Siblings in Mexico helped their parents by visiting them and supporting them financially. A sister in Mexico recounted that her siblings in Mexico used to take turns every week to visit her parents.

No, well, because all of us help them . . . . We take turns every eight days, one of us goes first, then goes the other. That's why we live here, the others live in Ensenada. (Adrina, Sister, 38, Mexico)

Siblings in Mexico cooperated with the migrant in the U.S. to support their parents. Migrants provided money in the form of remittances to support parents and their siblings in Mexico in turn used the money sent from the U.S. to address parents' needs and problems. The following comments from two siblings in Mexico highlighted the cooperation across borders:

He asks me to try and manage the situation and the problems, as much as I can, because sometimes he has a hard time, as he has his own financial problems, and he has his family to take care of, and sometimes he asks me: "Help me, support me, so that our parents can solve their problems, lend me a hand" . . . He asks me to always take care of them and he promises he will support me, so that my parents (my mother now) don't lack anything that is necessary. (Janet, Sister, 48, Mexico)

[Odalys] sends the money to me, addressed to me, because she (her mother in law) can't go to collect the money, because she can't walk... Sometimes I receive the money and I tell her. "Look, [Odalys] sent this amount" and so she says "Take that much and buy some fish or some chicken", whatever she says, because the money is hers. I always take into account what she says and also I see that she takes care of herself and I always keep [Odalys] informed about everything. (Natalia, Sister in-law, 46, Mexico)

**Parents' health problems: "*I worry about my parents' health*"**

Older parent's health problems were common reasons that migrants interacted with their family members in Mexico. When parents experienced health problems, they needed help and financial support from adult children in both geographic locations.

Many parents in Mexican transnational families had health problems because of their age and illness.

My mom...well, she suffers from the health problems typical of the elderly: her stomach hurts, she has low blood pressure, mouth ulcers, an injured foot, and things like those. About my dad, well...it was definitely due to his age too..... Five months ago he fell down and broke his hip. So, he was operated on and put a plate. He was in hospital for 15 days and we bought him an orthopedic bed and a wheelchair and his medicines. He had to stay in bed for five months and as soon as he left the bed he had to use the wheelchair. (Janet, Sister, 48, Mexico)

In spite of parents' bad health, adult children in the U.S. could not physically take care of their parents. Therefore, the only thing adult children could do for their parents was to help them financially through providing money for treatment and medicine. One mother received money from her son in the U.S. for her operation. "One year ago I was operated on because I had a health problem with my gallbladder and they gave me the money for those medical expenses" (Gaby, Mother, 59, Mexico).

## **Associational solidarity**

Associational solidarity is represented by the frequency and patterns of contacts between generations (Bengston & Roberts, 1991). Face to face interaction, telephone calls, e-mail, and shared activities are typical ways that families express associational solidarity. All of the transnational Mexico-Minnesota families in this study were in frequent contact via telephone and Internet. Some families were able to visit one another, though this was less common than other means of contact.

### **Making contacts using various methods: “*She keeps in touch with us constantly*”**

One way that the families in this study worked at maintaining associational solidarity was that they talked with each other regularly. Making contact, using various methods, was one of the most important ways of maintaining associational solidarity in a transnational context; it made transnational families feel less distance from family members. One of the family members in Mexico said, “A little, there is a distance between us because she left, but she keeps in touch with us, constantly” (Natalia, Sister in-law, 46, Mexico).

Various means of communication such as telephones, cell phones, and Internet were used to keep in touch with family members. However, telephones were the most frequently used medium of contact. Study participants stated that it was the cheapest way to stay in touch. Adult children in the U.S. usually initiated the calls to their parents in Mexico.

Parents in Mexico thought having phones was a necessity for them to maintain associational solidarity with adult children in the U.S. A son who had elderly parents in

Mexico said “Well, by telephone most frequently, on the line telephone at home that is the least expensive way” (Nito, Son, 49, Minnesota).

The development of technology influenced the ways of making contact between Mexican transnational families. Cell phones and the Internet were also often used to maintain associational solidarity between adult children and their parents in a transnational context. The transnational families exchanged photographs via cell phone and e-mail. While the Internet was also an inexpensive way for families to interact in a transnational context, elderly parents in Mexico were not familiar with this technology. A daughter in the U.S. who tried to contact her elderly mother using the Internet said:

Now my daughter uses Internet, which is much cheaper, but my parents don't know how to use it. My mom doesn't like the Internet. We used to write to her on the Messenger but she didn't feel at ease talking to a machine, she wanted to hear my voice. (Ivana, Daughter, 38, Minnesota)

The content of the conversations, using various methods, also showed the patterns of interaction between adult children and their parents. Mexican transnational families talked about their daily lives in Mexico and the U.S. A daughter in the U.S. talked about it. “How they are doing, the weather, the house, if they need anything...About my brothers and sisters, about my dad, almost the whole week we get through” (Martha, Daughter, 40, Minnesota).

Adult children who sent money to parents in Mexico also talked about the use of those remittances with parents. They discussed why and how much money was needed and whether, when, and how the migrants would send the money. A son in the U.S. discussed his conversations about money with his parents in Mexico.

About how my dad is doing, if they have enough food, how my sisters and brother are doing, what problems they have had, if the house is all right, if they need money.....Sometimes we talk about it (the purpose of sending money) on the phone, but then we usually send the money to one person only. (Fernando, Son, 39, Minnesota)

**Visiting: “*She is sorry because she can’t come to visit us*”**

Visiting was another important way of maintaining associational solidarity in the lives of this study’s transnational families. Though all of the families in the data could not visit each other, five parents who could afford to travel in this study visited adult children in the U.S. rather than children visiting parents in Mexico. Some adult children did not have documentation that proved their legal immigrant status in the U.S. therefore they were limited in visiting Mexico whenever they wanted. A sister in Mexico talked about her mother’s visiting. “Yes, my mom goes very often. Well, I don’t know, twice a year, three times a year, she often goes there with them... She stays three or four months here and then goes back. That is the way” (Alejandra, Sister, 42, Mexico).

Adult children in the U.S. rarely visited parents in Mexico. Four adult children in the study never visited Mexico after leaving; three adult children visited Mexico only once during the 10 to 15 years they had lived in the U.S. Of the migrants who visited Mexico, they most often did so for an emergency situation such as parents’ health problems. A sister-in-law recalled when her sister-in-law in the U.S. visited Mexico. “She came once, when her mother was seriously ill, she came to see her and to help her” (Natalia, Sister -in-law, 46, Mexico).

Though adult migrant children wanted to visit their parents in Mexico, they were afraid to go because they lacked the proper documentation that would allow them to re-enter the United States.

No, he has never returned.... Simply fearing not to be able to go back (to the U.S.), because he wants to come back to Mexico, but he has planned to come back after a certain period of time, or at least he had it in mind when he left, that is, to stay a number of years (in the U.S.) to be able to save money and then come back and set up his own business (a shop) here. (Michelle, Sister, 46, Mexico)

A Mexico mother expressed her U.S. migrant daughter's feelings. "She is sorry because she can't come, as she doesn't have papers. She would like to see us, and he (her husband) would like to see her....." (Perla, Mother, 82, Mexico). Most of Mexican transnational families were limited in their efforts to maintain associational solidarity by visiting because of adult children's lack of documentation for subsequent re-entry in the U.S.

### **Functional solidarity**

Functional solidarity is defined as the degree of helping and exchange of resources between generations (Bengston & Roberts, 1991). Two themes, sending remittances and less accessibility, were found in participants' narratives that expressed ways they maintained functional solidarity in their transnational family contexts. Sending remittances home to their family members in Mexico was something every migrant in this study did and was a part of the selection process to be included in the study. However, sending remittances had deeper meaning to Mexican transnational families

because adult migrant children were limited in their ability to provide physical assistance to their parents in Mexico.

***Sending remittances: “I have had financial benefits thanks to them”***

Sending remittances was an important method to maintain functional solidarity. All the adult children in the study sent remittances to parents in Mexico. Five parents in Mexico mentioned that the money they received from their adult children was their only financial resource. A father in Mexico talked about how often his daughter sent money to him. “Yes, they tell us to ask them when we need money; they are always concerned about us. Sometimes they send money every 15 days, sometimes every month, sometimes to pay for something” (Gustavo, Father, 76, Mexico).

Four parents mentioned that they received retirement pensions from the Mexican government or other resources so they did not need their adult children’s financial support. However, adult migrant children still sent remittances to their parents because it made both adult children and their parents feel connected in this transnational context. A fifty year-old daughter in the U.S. said, “Although my brothers also give her money, she doesn’t lack anything, but I always enjoy sending her some money” (Odalys, Daughter, 50, Minnesota). A sister in Mexico also mentioned that remittances from adult migrant children made her parents’ feel better:

I don’t think they would have problems, because his retirement (her father’s) added to what he gets from farming, which is no big thing, is enough for them to survive one agriculture term or cycle, that is, until they pick up the next harvest..... May be, but if he sends money to them it is more to make them feel better, and not so much because they are in need . They won’t stop having food if he doesn’t send the money, but he feels better that way, because he is so far away. (Michelle, Sister, 46, Mexico)

The frequency and amount of remittances between generations in Mexican transnational families was different for each family. Some adult children in the U.S. sent money regularly to support parents in Mexico. Parents in Mexico received money, on average, once or twice a month in an amount between 1000 pesos to 5000 pesos (\$80 to \$400 in U.S. dollars). A parent whose son sent money regularly said:

Every month..... It varies, sometimes 3 or 4 thousand pesos..... He hasn't stopped so far, it hasn't happened, he has been sending constantly. It hasn't happened that: "Oh!!! No, now there is no money and they won't have enough to eat". He has sent (money) constantly. (Angeles, Mother, 87, Mexico)

Some adult children sent money to parents occasionally such as for holidays or during emergency situations in Mexico. Emergency situations included when elderly parents needed medical treatment or medicine. Adult children in the U.S. explained how they sent money to parents occasionally for holidays or emergencies. "As December is coming, I tell my wife that I can't refuse to work overtime, because if we want to have a good time they want to have a good time, too (in Mexico)" (Pablo, Son, 30, Minnesota). "For example, my mom tells me: My son, I am ill, can you send me some money for medicines? and I send it to her. As long as I can" (Francisco, Son, 42, Minnesota).

Parents in Mexico used remittances from children for various purposes such as daily expenses, medical treatment, house repairs, and airfare tickets to the U.S. Frequently elderly parents mentioned that they used the money for a medical operation, medical equipment, and medicine. A sister who supported her elderly mother in Mexico mentioned that remittances were used for her mother's illness:

My mom was quite elderly and she said she was ill and that she had better use the money to recover from illness..... the orthopedic bed, which cost 7,800

pesos, and the wheelchair. Those were paid off with the money he was sending. He has been sending money to cover those expenses. (Janet, Sister, 48, Mexico)

Most parents in Mexico appreciated receiving remittances because the money contributed to an improved quality of life. “Thanks to our daughters, Aida and Mercy, they send money to help us, they say if we need something...” (Laura, Mother, 72, Mexico).

I have had financial benefits thanks to them, because they are concerned about everything: they give me for food, they gave me to build a bedroom, everything, they have gathered money for me, (for the operation) they have bought all the furniture, they have made improvements in my little house. (Katia, Mother, 71, Mexico)

**Less accessibility: “*I can help her financially, but not physically*”**

Because of their unique transnational living situations, adult children found it difficult if not impossible to give physical assistance to their aging parents, which is often a typical way for families to enact functional solidarity. The great distance apart along with their lack of documentation, were barriers to migrants’ ability to travel to see their parents in Mexico. The migrants expressed concerns about their limitations to providing physical assistance. Two migrant sons in the U.S. talked about these concerns. “My parents are elderly people, they could pass away, they could get a serious illness, they could have a serious accident, and there is no way to come and go very quickly” (Jorge, Son, 32, Minnesota). “My mom is quite elderly now and if she happened to pass away...I am so far away here, I might not be able to help her while she is alive” (Francisco, Son, 42, Minnesota).

To maintain functional solidarity in a transnational context with parents, adult children in the U.S. tended to focus more on giving financial support to make up for their inability to visit physically. Financial assistance became the only support that they could provide in their current transnational family context. Adult migrant children in the U.S. commented on how they substituted financial support for physical support because of their situations. “When she tells me that she is ill...I keep thinking about her. So far away and I can’t help her, I can help her financially, but not comfort her morally or help her physically” (Francisco, Son, 42, Minnesota). “I am not there to see how they are doing and sometimes, sending a little money makes you feel better because you feel you are helping them” (Sofia, Daughter, 37, Minnesota).

These narratives revealed adult migrant children’s challenges to realizing functional solidarity. They wanted to provide physical assistance when their parents were ill but travel was prohibitive due to distance and lack of documentation. However, they found comfort in the fact that they were able to remit important financial resources to buy necessary medicine and health services.

### **Affectual solidarity**

Two themes describe the ways that the families in this study realized affectual solidarity, which is characterized by the type and degree of closeness and positive sentiment between family members (Bengston & Roberts, 1991). Adult migrant children in the U.S. and their parents in Mexico expressed one theme of love, support, and concern, and a second theme of longing and enduring. In the study, Mexican transnational families expressed mixed feelings about living as transnational families.

**Love, support, and concern: “Regarding the emotional aspect, I would ask support from my family in Mexico”**

One of the ways transnational families maintained affectual solidarity was through their expression of love when they talked with each other and visited. A mother shared how her children including her son in the U.S. expressed their love for her.

No, my sons call me: “Mother beautiful”, “Mother dear”, “Mother I love you, very much, and I long to see you” and when I go over there with my son [Rodrigo] and he sees I am lying in bed, he comes and lies on the bed, by my side, and hugs me, kisses me, and shows all his affection, as if he were a little boy, and they are all like that. (Katia, Mother, 71, Mexico)

The exchange of emotional support was evident in the families in this study. In particular, adult children in the U.S. mentioned that emotional support from their parents in Mexico was important to them living in a foreign country. A son in the U.S. talked about the importance of support from family members in Mexico. “Of course, my mom’s support, my grandma’s support, are also essential, they are my close family” (Pablo, Son, 30, Minnesota). A daughter in the U.S. talked about asking for support from her family in Mexico:

I think I would first ask my family to help me, mainly my family here, who are the ones who support me. And then, as regards the emotional aspect, I would ask support from my family in Mexico. (Sofia, Daughter, 37, Minnesota)

The other way of maintaining affectual solidarity was showing concern for family members. Transnational families often expressed concern based on love toward family members in other countries. As they could not see each other often, adult children in the U.S. were concerned about elderly parents’ health, needs, and living alone in rural areas. Parents in Mexico also worried about how their adult children were doing in the

U.S., especially that something bad could happen to them. A mother who had a 42 year old son in the U.S. said “Well, that something bad happened to him over there without us knowing about it. An accident at his work, it is not unusual” (Michelle, Mother, 74, Mexico).

However, while both adult children and their parents were worried about each other, they tried to avoid talking about bad things that happened in their daily lives. When they did talk about bad things happening in their lives, they knew their family members in Mexico started to worry about them. The same true for parents in Mexico. A mother in Mexico talked about it:

No, when I feel bad I won't tell my son, because if I do that, he won't be relaxed at work. He will be thinking: “Oh, my mom is ill, she has something...”. No, when we talk (on the phone) I always tell him “I am fine” and he asks me: “How are you, mom?”, “I am fine”. (Katia, Mother, 71, Mexico)

Even without explicitly sharing their negative feelings, transnational family members could often discern that their distant son, daughter, or parent was experiencing difficulties because of the tone of their voice. A mother in Mexico mentioned that her son and she could figure out when each other had a problem.

Sometimes, even the tone in our voice, we know each other well, I know when my son has a problem, because of the tone in his voice, and he knows me and he knows his grandma. So he knows when we have problems: “Listen, you have some kind of problem”, “No, well, yes, you see, this and that happened” and he worries. (Liliana, Mother, 48, Mexico)

**Longing and enduring: “*It is quite hard to have your family so far away*”**

Mexican transnational families in this study maintained affectual solidarity by expressing love when they made telephone calls and visited, giving emotional support to

each other, and showing concern for family members. However, the various efforts to maintain affectual solidarity between generations were not satisfying, so they expressed a striking sense of longing for their loved ones. Both parents in Mexico and adult children in the U.S. mentioned that they missed their family members. A mother who was staying with relatives in Mexico expressed the longing she felt for her son in the U.S.:

I feel sad because I need him. As we have always been together, all the time. Even when we talk each other on the phone, it is not the same as being with him. The truth is that it is quite hard to have your family so far away. It is emotionally difficult. (Karla, Mother, 62, Mexico)

A sister in Mexico also described how her brother in the U.S. missed his parents and family members in Mexico:

Well, (he says) “his batteries are worn out or low” because he misses my parents, because he would want to be here, specially when we tell him about the family parties we have, like Christmas, that’s when he gets really sad. (Michelle, Sister, 46, Mexico)

Transnational living situations made it difficult for the families in this study to maintain intergenerational affectual solidarity. However, Mexican transnational families tried to endure the situation because they knew that their adult children had better opportunities in the United States. A parent whose son worked at a food processing factory in Minnesota said:

Their absence is an empty space that they leave and you can’t fill it, but with the idea that they are going to be better off, for example, Sergio, that he could work and be better off over there, you become satisfied about their leaving. (Jonathan, Father, 88, Mexico)

## **Normative solidarity**

There was only one theme that emerged in the area of normative solidarity, which is reflected in family members' attitudes about the importance of family and values about helping and supporting family members (Bengston & Roberts, 1991). The cultural norm of familism was maintained in Mexican transnational families by making efforts to give financial supports and their desire to live together with parents. This reflects the strong value of familism, the importance of family, and the interdependence among family members that typically describes Mexican culture.

### **Strong familism: *“Our goal must be our family’s welfare”***

Mexican families are based on strong familism that emphasizes the importance of family and interdependence between family members (Falicov, 2001). Mexican transnational families in this study still made efforts to maintain their cultural norm, the value of familism, even living in two countries separately. The cultural norm in Mexican families continued to influence the relationships of the transnational families by maintaining a close and involved relationship and providing supports to family members. A son whose mother was in Mexico said, “Our goal must be our family’s welfare, as much for my family here as for my family back there” (Pablo, Son, 30, Minnesota).

Adult migrant children often gave financial supports to parents in Mexico and these financial responsibilities reflected the cultural norm of interdependence among family members in Mexican families. As functional solidarity results showed, five parents received financial support from adult children and this money was their only financial resource. However, four parents who had other resources and did not need adult

children's financial support also received remittances and remittances in this cases uniquely represent normative solidarity. In these families, adult children sent money to their parents based on the cultural norm of interdependence.

I always try and send them a bit more, so that they can cover their expenses over there... I would like to earn a lot more, so that I could send more money to Mexico, to help them cope with everything. (Jorge, Son, 32, Minnesota)

Whenever there is an emergency, an accident, someone's death, or a seizure order on the house or the plot. In these cases we sacrifice going out, having meals with friends or having parties, because they are emergencies. (Ivana, Daughter, 38, Minnesota)

Most family members in Mexico were satisfied with their family members' efforts to maintain normative solidarity by giving financial support.

It's been good for us and for them, so that they can have something.....If they have something, I have something too. If they don't then I don't. (Katia, Mother, 71, Mexico)

Yes, because she helps my mother in law a great deal, she helped us, she helped her brothers and sister, yes we have benefited from that... But it was a benefit for her and now she helps her family. (Natalia, Sister-in-law, 46, Mexico)

Living with parents and caring for each other was another form of maintaining normative solidarity in Mexican families. Based on their cultural norm, adult migrant children hoped to live with their parents and take care of them. A son in the U.S. talked about their desire, "I would have my own little house and I would take care of my folks as long as they live" (Nito, Son, 49, Minnesota). Thus, adult migrant children made efforts to invite their parents to the U.S., but most of parents were unable to travel to the U.S. because of their age and health problems. A sister in Mexico talked about his brother's wish:

His greatest wish was to try and take our parents with him, and, well...he has been struggling to manage that, but unfortunately our parents were too elderly. It was always his wish, but he couldn't achieve that. (Janet, Sister, 48, Mexico)

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to understand how Mexican transnational families maintain intergenerational solidarity among adult children and their parents across borders.

The transnational nature of these families was the key contextual factor affecting how they maintain intergenerational solidarity. More specifically, distance created a significant barrier to interact between generations; lack of proximity limited family members' ability to interact with one another on an intimate basis. Migrants left home and country to seek better opportunities for their families. Family members were now separated by national borders and great distances. Families did not possess the financial resources to travel back and forth to see one another. And even if they did have the financial means to travel, many could not because they lacked the necessary documentation to allow them to move freely between countries.

This physical and legal separation created tremendous challenges to have opportunities for interaction related to the structural dimension of intergenerational solidarity. Yet they found ways to stay connected and maintain a sense of family through more fully using other dimensions of the intergenerational solidarity model. Culturally, Mexican families are grounded in a strong sense of familism which emphasizes the importance of family and interdependence between family members. This shared value, evidence of normative solidarity, provided strong motivation on both sides

of the border to maintain connections between adult children and their parents to keep providing supports to family members such as Nesteruk and Marks's study (2009) on Eastern European transnational families.

One way familism was expressed was through efforts made by family members to stay in touch with one another at a distance. These connections, reflective of associational solidarity, were realized through frequent contact by phone and Internet. The widespread availability of cell phones in both countries allowed Mexican migrants in the U.S. and their parents in Mexico to keep in touch in ways typical of other immigrant families (Baldassar, 2007; Wilding, 2006). It was evident that families maintained their closeness, affectual solidarity, by expressing love, emotional support, and concern to each other over the phone. Family members longed for each other, but endured their situations because parents understood that their adult children had better opportunities in the U.S.

A unique challenge to these families in terms of maintaining associational solidarity was that many migrants could not freely travel to Mexico and back due to lack of documentation. This was particularly worrisome for migrants in Minnesota because they realized their parents were aging and they feared they would never see them again. Because adult children in Minnesota were less accessible to their parents in Mexico, they tended to focus more on providing financial support instead of physical support. Remittances from adult children to their parents were the primary conduit for expressing love and concern for their parents and the reflection of a cultural norm of interdependence in Mexican families. Structurally, siblings in Mexico became a

significant bridge between parents who were experiencing health problems and the Minnesota-based migrants who were unable to provide physical support.

Similar to what Bengston and Roberts (1991) found, the results of this study also showed that some dimensions of intergenerational solidarity were interconnected. In Mexican transnational families, making contact and remittances were important methods to express their love, support, and concern to each other. Giving financial supports, remittances, also reflected the cultural norm of interdependence in Mexican transnational families. Thus, the results suggested associational solidarity and functional solidarity were connected to affectual solidarity, and functional solidarity was connected to normative solidarity in the transnational context of families in this study.

A unique contribution of this study of the field of family studies is to understand how Mexican transnational families maintained intergenerational family relationships by exploring their unique challenges to maintain intergenerational solidarity and efforts to overcome these challenges in a transnational context. This study found that Mexico-U.S. transnational families had great challenges of maintaining intergenerational relationships. A great distance across national borders between adult migrant children and their parents, adult children's lack of documentation for freely visiting Mexico, and less accessibility between generations limited family member's ability to maintain intergenerational relationships in a transnational context. These transnational challenges strengthened other ways of maintaining intergenerational relationships. Adult children in the U.S. emphasized giving financial assistance to parents and cooperation with siblings in Mexico to compensate for their limitation of giving physical assistance to parents. Both

adult migrant children and their parents also frequently made contacts to share about their daily lives and express love to each other for maintaining the intergenerational solidarity across borders.

Thus, the result of this study expanded the intergenerational solidarity theory by exploring the unique patterns of how Mexican transnational families maintain their intergenerational solidarity. This study found that each dimension of intergenerational solidarity theory had a different meaning to explain intergenerational solidarity in Mexican transnational families. The results of this study showed these families chose to become transnational families across the U.S. and Mexico even though the decision could threaten their solidarity between family members. The results of associational solidarity related to visiting and functional solidarity related to less accessibility showed Mexican transnational families' challenges to maintain intergenerational solidarity caused by the transnational context. In spite of these challenges, the important motivation of maintaining intergenerational solidarity across borders was suggested in the result of normative solidarity by showing the cultural norm of Mexican families that emphasized the importance of family. Based on their cultural value, these transnational families tried to overcome their challenges from the U.S.-Mexico transnational context by making great efforts to maintain intergenerational solidarity across borders. Their efforts were reflected in the results of associational solidarity in a theme of making contact using various methods, the results of functional solidarity in a theme of sending remittances, the results of affectual solidarity, and the results of structural solidarity in a theme of siblings in Mexico. The result of this study captured the patterns of maintaining intergenerational

solidarity in Mexican transnational families who faced unique and complex contexts related to geographical, economical, and cultural aspects to maintain intergenerational family relationships.

### **Limitations and future research**

One limitation of this study was that because the data were collected for other purposes, specific questions relating to understanding intergenerational solidarity were not asked. For example, consensual solidarity could not be explored for the original study did not ask questions to ascertain agreement on values, attitudes, and beliefs between generations. Second limitation was the interviews were short and not repeated over time to gather more information or create trust to get the detailed information necessary to test emotional aspects. This study revealed that transnational family members experienced complex emotions about maintain intergenerational relationship across borders such as a theme of longing and enduring in the result of affectual solidarity. However, the study could not explore transnational family member's emotional elements deeply because interviews were conducted only once in a short interview. The last limitation was the interviews were conducted in Spanish and translated into English. As a result, participants' thoughts expressed in their native Spanish language might have been less precise after translation into English. However, great care was taken to minimize those inaccuracies through a thorough review by bi-lingual researchers.

To more thoroughly understand this phenomenon, future research is needed to interview transnational families directly about intergenerational relationships. Questions would included asking them describe how transnational contexts change their

intergenerational relationships, including agreement on values, attitudes, and beliefs between generations will provide deeper understanding about intergenerational relationships in transnational contexts. And the interviews needed to be conducted more than once focusing on emotional changes about maintaining intergenerational relationships in transnational families. This would be helpful to capture ambivalences in transnational families that identified in this study more deeply about maintaining family ties across borders. It would also be important for future study to expand the study of intergenerational relationships in various transnational families who live other places than Mexico and the U.S. The complexity of the role documentation or lack of documentation play in the study of transnational families from Mexico heavily influences study findings. Expansion to transnational families involving other countries may not have that ominous contextual variable.

## **Implication**

It is important to use what is learned about maintaining intergenerational relationships in the Mexico-U.S. transnational families to the family field, migrants' work environments, educational programs, and perspectives on immigration. The goal of such efforts is to better understand Mexican migrants so that Mexican migrants work successfully in their work environments and maintain good relationships with their family members.

This study could help family scholars or practitioners to understand the importance of family contexts examining intergenerational solidarity. The results of this study suggested evidences that unique family contexts such as geographical, economical,

and cultural aspects impact the ways of maintaining intergenerational solidarity. Thus, it is important for family scholars and practitioners to consider the unique family contexts, especially geographical and physical locations, as important elements to examine intergenerational solidarity.

Migrants' employers can use the research results for understanding their employees who are members of transnational families and provide better work environments. Mexican migrants hope to visit Mexico when their family members are in emergency situations so they need more flexible work environments to visit Mexico when their family members need them. Employers could recognize that their employees are the members of transnational families and set policies and procedures that allow this flexibility for migrant employees.

One way educators utilize this research is to understand norms in Mexican families and develop a curriculum that teaches Mexican migrants how to manage their financial resources successfully. Mexican migrants have an obligation to provide financial support to their parents so they try to send more remittances to Mexico. Thus, educational curriculums are needed to teach them how to manage their financial resources, understand the U.S. financial system, and to balance their expenses for living in the U.S. while sending remittances for parents in Mexico.

This study also has the potential to inform the public debate on immigration. The study provides contextual data to understand the complex lives of transnational families where adult children have moved from their home to support family members still in Mexico. The current public debate focuses on the legality of a migrant's situation and this

study can provide the context of “why” people make the sacrifice, often in a dangerous context, to migrate to the U.S.

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