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“If the Student Is Good, Let Him Fly”: Moral Support for College Among Latino Immigrant Parents

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The propensity of Latino immigrant parents to provide moral support for education has been well-documented, as has the influence of parent involvement on achievement and college-going. One route toward improving Latino school outcomes and college access is to better understand the cultural logic of parents' actions. This article draws on data from an ethnographic study to explore the possibilities and constraints of parents' moral support role. It documents parents' strategies and shows how these were shaped by social location, cultural models, and family dynamics in adapting to immigrants' ecocultural niche. Implications for parent outreach and college access programs are discussed.

Key words: parent involvement, Latino immigrants, moral support, college access, secondary education, equity

How do Latino immigrant parents with limited formal education and college knowledge support their children's pathway to college as first-generation students? This question is important in light of the need to increase Latino college enrollment and of research showing the pivotal role parents play in college-going (Gándara, 1995; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; McDonough, 1997). The more we know about the cultural logic of how diverse parents respond to college opportunities, the better we can craft programs and policies to promote equity.

The propensity of Latino immigrant parents to provide “noninterventionist” moral support and “indirect guidance” for education has been well-documented (e.g., Azmitia, Cooper, Garcia, & Dunbar, 1996; Delgado-Gaitan & Segura, 1989;

Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard, & Lintz, 1996; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Mehan et al. (1996) noted how such support is often “invisible” to educators and hence dismissed as unimportant. If we are to better understand this support, rather than dismissing it or stating it as a given, we need to probe its meaning and dynamics. What are the roots of immigrant parents’ stance as moral supporters? What strategies do they use to show moral support, and how do their students respond? How might schools build on this resource to enhance school outcomes and college access for Latino students?

This article draws on data from an ethnographic case study at a Los Angeles area high school to explore the possibilities and constraints of immigrant parents’ moral support role. It illustrates how moral support for college was enacted through verbal encouragement, cautionary tales, and other *consejos* (narrative advice) among the parents of students in a college access program. These strategies were shaped by parents’ social location, cultural models, and family dynamics as they adapted to their ecocultural niche as immigrants. The study suggests several implications for parent outreach and college access programs.

MORAL SUPPORT FOR EDUCATION

Moral support for education is the foundation—perhaps the essence—of how Latino immigrant parents (here, mainly low socioeconomic status (SES) Mexican and Central American immigrants) participate in their children’s schooling. When Spanish-speaking Latino parents discuss parent involvement in education, they speak in terms of “*apoyo*” (support) rather than “involvement” in the mainstream sense (Auerbach, 2001). Virtually all encourage their children to study and do well in school; smaller numbers provide instrumental help; even fewer act as educational advocates (Auerbach, 2001, 2004a; Delgado-Gaitan & Segura, 1989; Olivos, 2003). Moral support encompasses practices such as stressing the value of education and hard work; encouraging students to study, do well, and go to college; and sharing *consejos* (narrative advice) and other stories to reinforce the message (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; López, 2001; Reese, Balzano, Gallimore, & Goldenberg, 1995). For example, López (2001) described how migrant worker parents “translated the lessons of working hard in the field into lessons for working hard in school” (p. 422) to their high-achieving children, and proposes that this transmission of sociocultural values be recognized as a legitimate form of parent involvement.

There are several reasons why educators may overlook the importance of parents’ moral support. First, the legacy of deficit thinking has ingrained the erroneous assumption that Latino parents do not care about education (Valencia & Black, 2002). The prevalence of strong parent moral support for schooling—as well as numerous studies of families and education—clearly disprove this ideology. But because moral support is intangible and takes place in the home, most likely in

Spanish, it is consigned to invisibility. What counts as parent involvement to most educators is practices traditionally associated with White, middle-class parents, like homework help and attendance at school events (Auerbach, 2001; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; López, 2001; Valdés, 1996). Latino parents tend to avoid coming to school for various reasons, ranging from lack of Spanish-speaking school staff and logistical barriers to feelings of discomfort, shame, or alienation in dealing with educators (Gándara, 1995; Olivos, 2003; Romo & Falbo, 1996; Yonezawa, 1997). As long as they do not appear at school, parents' efforts to motivate and encourage their child go unrecognized. Parents' moral support may also be overlooked because it is an integral part of the culture of Latino immigrant families that is either little understood by non-Latino educators or sometimes taken for granted by Latino educators who grew up with it. There is an opening here to use ethnography as it was intended—to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange—regarding the construct of moral support for education.

This study examines moral support through a three-part theoretical lens, in which parent roles in education are structured by social class and race/ethnicity, while being mediated by cultural belief systems and parent-child relationships (Auerbach, 2001). These social, cultural, and psychological dimensions of parent role construction intersect in unique ways for individuals, yet show recurring patterns among Latino immigrant parents.

Social location limits the type of support that low SES Latino immigrant parents can provide for education. Due to their class and race/ethnicity, they have more systemic barriers to access to overcome; at the same time, they have fewer resources for the struggle, such as English fluency and knowledge of the American K-16 system. Like the working-class White parents in Lareau's (1989) classic study of parent involvement, most Latino immigrant parents lack the requisite economic, social, and cultural capital for directly helping their children in school. Like other parents of color, immigrant parents often face practical class-based barriers—such as heavy work schedules, child care and transportation needs—that prevent their attendance at school events, and hold beliefs that may be in conflict with school norms (Gándara, 1995; Valdés, 1996). Schools typically marginalize poor, minority parents by failing to accommodate their needs, validate their culture, or create an inclusive, welcoming climate (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Fine, 1993; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Olivos, 2003; Yonezawa, 1997).

Beliefs and practices surrounding moral support for education are deeply rooted in traditional Latino cultural models. D'Andrade (1992) suggested that "cultural schemas," or native interpretive systems, can function as goals or "master motives" for how people think and act. The degree to which Latino immigrant parents embrace traditional schemas depends on their life history, such as number of years in the United States and degree of exposure to mainstream American cultural models like parent involvement norms. The traditional models discussed here are associated with agrarian ways of life in Mexico and Central America and are more

likely to be embraced by lower SES immigrants from small towns with relatively little formal education or familiarity with American schooling (Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1995; Reese, 2002; Reese et al., 1995). They form part of the “immigrant frame of reference” that underlies the behavior of immigrants in the United States (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1993).

The cultural schema of *educación* has a powerful impact on how Latino immigrant parents participate in their children’s education (Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1995; Mehan et al., 1996; Reese et al., 1995; Valdés, 1996). This broad term encompasses moral training, based in the home, as well as academic training, based in the school, with the former a condition for the latter. Parents’ role is to provide the strong moral foundation, without which school learning is seen as impossible or irrelevant. A child who is *bien educado/a* (well-educated, well-mannered) is a good person with correct behavior and a respectful manner (*respeto*) who follows the *buen camino* (right path) in life, including doing well in school (Reese et al., 1995). With this schema, it is not surprising that many immigrant parents see their role primarily as educational motivators and encouragers (Azmitia et al., 1996; Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; Valdés, 1996). Parents in Reese et al.’s (1995) study, for example, felt that the most important action they could take to help their children do well in elementary school was to talk with them about correct behavior. Of course, this is a function not only of how these parents view their role but of the limited resources low SES immigrant parents have for taking on more direct forms of academic support (Gándara, 1995; Lareau, 1989; Mehan et al., 1996).

The value placed on *educación* in traditional Latino culture is often expressed through *consejos*, narrative forms of indirect teachings and “nurturing advice” that adults use to guide and strengthen young people (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994). Villanueva (1996) found that *consejos* were the main vehicle through which less educated older immigrants supported education, in contrast to the more varied instrumental support of more acculturated generations. Similarly, Gándara (1995) noted that many immigrant parents of successful Latino students told stories of former family prosperity or renown in Mexico by way of motivating their children to achieve.

The widespread value of “attitudinal familism” provides a bridge between cultural and psychosocial influences on parent roles. Familism, which sees the family as a central referent, source of support, and obligation for individuals, has traditionally shaped Latino family relationships and socialization. Psychological tests with Latino students reveal a distinctive “achievement-nurturance cluster,” in which the drive to achieve is embedded in the wish to nurture one’s relatives (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1993). Thus, more than children generally, “the children of immigrants become the repository of their parents’ expectations” (p. 135). Parents’ *consejos* around education often reinforce the sense of mutual obligation among family members. Many children of immigrants attribute their academic success to their family, specifically their family’s moral and emotional support (Gándara, 1995; Treviño, 2004).

RESEARCH SETTING AND METHODOLOGY

Data for this article are drawn from an ethnographic case study of parent roles in college access for students of color at a large, diverse Los Angeles area high school (Auerbach, 2001, 2004a). Postsecondary outcomes at “Pacific High” divided along racial and geographic lines, with higher SES White and Asian students more likely to attend 4-year colleges and lower SES Latino and African American students generally going on to community college, work, or the military. University of California, Los Angeles’s Futures Project combined a college access program with a 4-year study of 25 working-class Latino and African American students at Pacific. I coordinated the project’s monthly Futures & Families meetings for parents related to college planning (Auerbach, 2004b).

This article focuses on 7 parents (5 Mexicans and 2 Guatemalans) who stressed moral support, from a purposive sample of 16 parents with students in the Futures Project. One mother had no formal education; two mothers and one father had been to junior high; and three fathers had some high school in their home countries and/or the United States. Two parents had immigrated as young adolescents, two as young adults, and three within the past 10 years. One parent was a skilled craftsman; two did semiskilled work; two did unskilled work; and two were housewives. Their students’ GPA (two immigrants, two U.S.-born) ranged from 2.5 to 3.8.

Data collection methods included two in-depth, semistructured parent interviews in students’ junior and senior years, as well as 3 years of participant-observation at Futures & Families meetings, other project activities, and family-school interactions. Several interviews were conducted in Spanish with the assistance of the school’s bilingual community liaison, with all interviews taped and transcribed verbatim. Within-case and cross-case analysis included the coding of interview transcripts and field notes for patterns and themes, data displays, member checks, and consultations with colleagues.

Examination of the researcher’s role was integral to the research process so as to be explicit about the effects of positionality and bias (Auerbach, 2001). I recognize that as a White, middle-class researcher, I lack the cultural literacy to grasp many elements of immigrant parents’ experience. Yet my cultural outsider stance was helpful in exploring parents’ implicit beliefs about education, which cultural insiders might not think to probe.

MORAL SUPPORT STRATEGIES: EXHORTING
SUCCESS, POINTING THE WAY

All parents in the larger study claimed to offer moral support for college, in the sense of approving of and encouraging their children’s aspirations and stressing the value of higher education. However, only some parents emphasized this type of

indirect support in discussions of their beliefs and practices. I call these parents Moral Supporters and place them at the less proactive end of a continuum of parent support for college pathways compared to other working-class parents of color in the larger study (Auerbach, 2001, 2004a).

The key vehicle for parents' moral support was talking with their children at home. They used talk to stress the value of education, study, and hard work and to encourage their children to pursue their college aspirations. Metaphorically, parents exhorted their children to success, pointed the way, and cleared the path when they could. They took a hands-off approach, relying on their children to do well in school and find out what they needed to do to get to university. They trusted the well-reputed school to prepare their children for college and provide superior educational opportunities (cf. Gándara, 1995).

The following translated excerpt from a parent portrait of José, an undocumented skilled craftsman and father of a high achieving student, exemplifies the Moral Supporters' stance:

My son has always been very intelligent. When he was in kindergarten in Mexico, they let him out about four months early because there was nothing to teach him, nothing. The parent is the one who plants the seed. I tell him, "If you study, you are going to accomplish what you want. If you are going to let others [peers] guide you, forget it; things are going to go to hell." The parent's job is to motivate him so he continues his education so he becomes something (*llegar a ser algo*). And then the student has to go his own way. I think he sees that we [his parents] are nothing; he wants to become something. He takes the initiative himself. He makes all his own decisions. The student knows more than us. One simply advises him to investigate [college options]; one can't do more than that. If the student is good, let him fly.

When asked to prioritize the most important strategies for helping their students on the pathway to college, these parents chose moral and emotional support, stressing the importance of education, and talking to children about university and careers, as well as setting limits on behavior. It is striking that most of these forms of support are verbal actions at home between parent and child rather than direct forms of help at home or school. For example, Gabriel, a painting contractor with a high school education, was convinced that, from an early age, "us talking to her and stressing that she has to study, has to get good grades because she has to go to university—repeating that constantly—has made the difference" in his daughter being a good student. These forms of support are partly a function of limited educational and economic resources, partly a reflection of traditional Latino cultural values and modes of expression.

All the Moral Supporters, especially mothers, gave evidence of strong belief in the cultural model of *educación*. For example, Antonia, a housewife who had at-

tended junior high in Mexico, believed that “to be an educated person that knows how to deal with people with respect and *educación*” could help in one’s career. José’s wife, Blanca, a housewife with no formal schooling, felt that sending children to school was not enough unless their parents had taught them to respect their elders and to help those in need.

Another cultural model embedded in moral support was the *estudios* schema, in which diligent study and effort are assumed to bring success (Reese et al., 1995). Parents stressed that it was students’ job to “study 100%.” This message is an extension of the strong immigrant work ethic, applied to school tasks, as in Gándara (1995) and López (2001). José had initially modeled studying for his son every night when he first arrived in the United States by puzzling together over his son’s fifth grade homework with a dictionary. Parents like José assumed that once encouraged to study hard, students would comply, with the benefits accruing accordingly.

Parents conveyed messages of moral support through *consejos* (cultural narrative advice and teachings), a key form of Latino parent support for education (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; Gándara, 1995; Valdés, 1996; Villanueva, 1996) or what Stanton-Salazar (2001) calls “the immigrant family treasury—accumulated folk capital” (p. 98). Gabriel was firm in his *consejos*: “What I have told my daughter is that in our family, there’s not one person with a college degree and that for her to be able to make a lot of money in the future and be able to live a good life, she has to go to university.” José explained, “Like I tell my son, success comes according to the *empeño* (dedication, commitment, effort) you invest in what you are doing. If you are dedicated, then you can achieve whatever you want. If you don’t put *ganas* (will, drive) into it, you become like us”—that is, struggling for economic survival. Typically, parents’ *consejos* were generic moral messages about the importance of education, including college. However, some advice was more strategic, as when José told his son to seize opportunity whenever he could and Gabriel urged his daughter to assert her rights and identity at school as a Latina.

José’s son, Roberto, took his parents’ *consejos* to heart and mentioned them as an example of how his parents had helped him on the path to college:

They tell me that I have to take advantage of any help that I get along the way. For example, in the Futures program, that’s gonna be a big help getting into college, or any scholarships or people that I can talk to ... They tell me you have to recognize when [opportunity] is there and when it’s not, and then when it’s there, you have to make sure that you get it.

His parents’ *consejos* inspired and guided Roberto’s attempt to navigate opportunity structures and pursue help-seeking behavior. As Delgado-Gaitan (1994) noted, students might already be doing what their parents’ *consejos* exhort, but

their parents' narratives empower them with the confidence to persist and be responsible for their education.

An important subset of *consejos* for immigrant parents in this and other studies were cautionary tales meant to steer children away from parents' own example and motivate them to succeed in school (Gándara, 1995; Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1995; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Treviño, 2004). As Luis said, in talking to his son,

I always use me as an example. Like, "Look at me. Do you want to work like me? You know, work hard and live like this? If you want to be more comfortable later on, you have to work hard now, go to school." Couple times, I took him to my work [at a factory] just to let him see what kind of work I do and if he would like to do that for the rest of his life.

The Supporters' children were well aware of life's hardships for those without a good education. As José said bitterly, referring to his wife's lack of formal schooling, his own limited education, and family financial struggles, "I think Roberto sees that we [his parents] are nothing; he wants to become somebody (*ser alguien*)."¹ Parents had mixed feelings of regret and anger in talking about their missed opportunities and highlighting the contrasts between what they did as students versus what they hoped their children would do. As Luis explained, "My parents didn't push me to do my homework. ... I had the chance in school but I was never pushed or supported to say, 'you can do it.' I don't want my kid to go through the same thing."²

Because parents could not lead the way for their children as educational role models, they used their experience to warn their children against repeating the pattern and to point the way to the "right path."³ Significantly, these cautionary tales of reverse role models were accompanied by positive messages promoting a strong work ethic. Treviño (2004), noting a similar tendency in migrant workers with successful children, suggested that parents were promoting their children's mental toughness as *luchistas* (proactive strivers) who could overcome obstacles.

Although the Moral Supporters' main strategies were intangible, they also took some occasional concrete steps to help their children. One of these was attending Futures & Families meetings, at their children's insistence, to learn more about college (Auerbach, 2004b). Most other steps, however, were done behind the scenes and did not require college knowledge or contact with the school. For example, some families made sacrifices to live in the area or commute from afar so their children could attend the well-reputed Pacific High, like parents in Mehan et al. (1996) who were otherwise not actively involved in education. Some cleared the way of potential distractions, such as family chores or the need to work while in school. After attending a parent meeting, for example, Antonia decided to relieve her daughter of babysitting so she could have time to study; the mother's own life was more restricted as a result. Luis told his son, despite financial troubles: "Your

school comes first. Let us worry about the bills, supply you with stuff. You worry about your grades, and that's it." These instances of clearing the path for student success are another way that parents demonstrated their commitment to college—or moral support—to their children. They may also represent a shift away from some traditional norms to accommodate social mobility aspirations.

CONFRONTING BARRIERS AND MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

The roots of immigrant parents' predisposition for a moral support role lay in traditional cultural models, yet this cultural orientation was grounded in socioeconomic realities. It was their social location as low-income immigrants unfamiliar with the U.S. system that primarily shaped parents' recourse to moral support. The parents were quick to note this constraint on their actions. At Futures & Families meetings and in interviews, they repeatedly and despairingly pointed to their lack of knowledge as a reason for not being more directly involved in their children's college pursuit. Gabriel commented:

All the information we are seeing [through Futures & Families meetings] is new because neither of us went to the university. We don't know what the process is like. It's very hard for an immigrant family to come [to meetings]; both parents have to work and you don't know the educational system. So there are barriers everywhere.

Though Gabriel cast his lot with fellow immigrant parents who shared his predicament, he later hastened to differentiate himself from those who did not aspire to college for their children. Similarly, Antonia was frustrated with her ignorance about college options:

Nobody helps my daughter at home; we don't know ... I would like to have more knowledge and information to be able to help my daughter. Like which university is most suitable and why. The Futures Project is doing most of the work because they are informing the students of everything they need to go to the university. We as parents would not take the concern and the time.

Immigrant parents' poor college knowledge was partly due to their lack of college-relevant information networks. None had regular contact with colleges or college-educated adults. They depended heavily on their children and on Futures & Families meetings as their sole source of college information. Though Gabriel had taken business classes at community college, was fluent in English, and had Internet access, he did not seek out college information. Antonia planned to go to

the school's College Fair and was devastated when her child announced she wanted to go alone. Significantly, immigrant parents at the College Fair were there mainly for moral support, accompanying their children at a discrete distance and offering to hold their bags full of brochures, rarely talking to college representatives or looking at the materials (even when Spanish was available). Their retiring behavior was in marked contrast to that of higher SES White, Asian, and African American parents at the event, who actively sought information (Auerbach, 2001). As McDonough (1997) suggested, help with college planning is most readily available to those who already have considerable cultural capital.

Immigrant parents in the Futures Project knew that Latinos were underrepresented in 4-year colleges but tended to blame the situation on their compatriots' "ignorance" rather than acknowledging discrimination or structural constraints. Parents did, however, question why all Pacific High students did not have the same classes when they learned that AP and Honors classes were dominated by Whites and Asians (Auerbach, 2002).

Parents were more apt to see the injustice of their social position in recalling the lack of educational opportunities in Mexico or Guatemala and the absence of their own parents' moral support. For example, Antonia was moved to support her child's higher education precisely because her own parents had not allowed her to go beyond *secundaria* (junior high school). Likewise, José resolved to do differently than his father:

I think I have been as strict with my children as my parents, but with the small difference that I have given them love, a little bit of fatherly love. And teaching. That was why I dedicated myself to teaching Roberto about studying since he was small.

Compared to their own parents' disapproval or apathy toward secondary schooling, the moral support for college among parents in this study was a marked improvement, with a better chance of enhancing family social status. Goldenberg and Gallimore (1995) and Reese (2002) found similar patterns of immigrant parents consciously trying to break from family tradition in strongly valuing their children's education.

TAKING THEIR CUE FROM THE STUDENT

Parent-child relationships and parents' perceptions of their children as students also helped to shape parents' moral support orientation. Parents took their cue from what Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) called their children's "invitations" for involvement, and let their children take the lead in educational decisions (cf. Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Parents were more apt to encourage their studies when

children exhibited quick learning at an early age or diligence in high school. They implied that their hands-off approach was best suited to self-motivated, efficacious students who could handle things themselves. Because their children seemed to be doing well in school and knew what steps to take, parents were reassured about their approach. Antonia felt she would need to be more involved if her child were not such a good student:

My daughter is an excellent student. Nobody helps her [with schoolwork] at home; we don't know [how]. She wants to study psychology. I try to give her all the moral support I can for what she wants. Since she is responsible, we don't have to get involved much. But if she were not so responsible, I would be there.

Parents offered contrasting examples of different attitudes or study habits in their other children, raising the question of whether they would offer the same moral support equally to all. For example, Gabriel pointed out that they might need to “change the strategy” for their younger child, who was a poor student. “If the students do not have the *deseo* (desire) and *ganas* (will, ambition) to get to the university ... you [as a parent] cannot do much to help them,” according to Gabriel’s wife, Rosalia. Likewise, Blanca believed that parent support should depend on the individual child. Her successful older son required little from her, but her truant, underachieving daughter called for intervention in the form of severe behavioral restrictions. Thus, “child invitations” for parent involvement—in the sense of the child’s school performance, level of responsibility, and receptivity to parents’ support—shaped how parents pursued their role.

Immigrant students in the study were aware of their parents’ sacrifices and grateful for their moral support. These students were accustomed to managing their own school decisions, just as they were accustomed to serving as cultural brokers for immigrant parents—both roles that confer serious responsibility. They urged their parents to go to Futures & Families meetings to learn more about college preparation but did not want or expect direct help from them because they saw their parents as “clueless.” For example, Antonia’s daughter said, “I wouldn’t want them to be too involved because they’d be interfering with what I want.” Perhaps in part because these students shared their family’s immigrant frame of reference, there was neither expectation nor disappointment regarding their parents’ limitations.

The U.S.-born child of Gabriel and Rosalia, however, was more ambivalent about her parents’ lack of school and college knowledge, like the acculturated Latino teens in Stanton-Salazar (2001) who expressed “skepticism and resignation” about their parents’ capacity to help them get ahead. Because Graciela resented how her father monopolized discussions, resisted his limitations on her freedom, and did not share his immigrant frame of reference, she was less receptive to her father’s *consejos* than an immigrant student like Roberto. Thus, the

very strategy that Gabriel thought was effective—the “stubborn” repetition of motivational messages about education—may have exacerbated family tension. U.S.-born students may want a different type of parent–child communication than their immigrant parents are socialized to provide. Some like Antonia, who had been exposed to more mainstream, psychology-based American approaches to parent–teen communication, attempted to apply these at home but still encountered resistance.

Yet another aspect of family dynamics affecting parents’ moral support role was the position of target students in this study as the oldest child. There was no recourse to the common strategy of parents calling on older siblings as role models and providers of help with homework or with college applications (Reese, 2002; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). In addition, parents like Antonia and Rosalia devoted more attention to their younger children’s schooling, where they felt they could be more useful, assuming the oldest child could manage on his or her own.

ADAPTATION TO AN IMMIGRANT ECOCULTURAL NICHE

The tendency of immigrant parents to offer moral support on the sidelines while leaving the navigation of educational pathways to their children is not only an artifact of their social location, cultural models, and family dynamics but also an adaptation to their ecocultural niche or habitat (Tharpe & Gallimore, 1988). Structural forces and environmental conditions combine with cultural beliefs in particular social contexts or ecocultural niches to guide people’s choices and activities (Reese, 2002). For example, Latino immigrant parents’ propensity for a more authoritarian parenting style when compared to American norms can be explained partly as an adaptation to poor, dangerous neighborhoods (Gándara, 1995; Reese, 2002). Whereas well-educated middle-class parents are positioned advantageously to guide their children’s educational pathway, immigrant parents with relatively low incomes, education, English fluency, and knowledge of the U.S. system are positioned to be more dependent on their children.

Immigrant parents’ moral support role may be an extension of the pattern of deference to and reliance on their children’s greater English and literacy skills in dealing with institutions. For example, José and Antonia called on their children’s help with legal and financial problems. Orellana (2001) suggested that immigrant parents having children translate for them is a type of cultural brokering that is not only practical for families but educative and developmentally rich for children. In contrast to dominant middle-class norms that emphasize the role of play in children’s lives, immigrant parents expect children to contribute to the work of the household. Children of immigrants take on serious responsibilities from a young

age. Thus, immigrant parents' inculcation of a strong work ethic in their children is both a cultural inheritance and a functional adaptation to the conditions in which they live.

Several conditions come together in this ecocultural niche to promote parents' particular role adaptation. Their lack of English fluency and college knowledge, their children's background as cultural brokers, and the family's habit of reliance on children's help may lead parents to take on a supportive bystander role. If parents have expected and received help from the child for years in dealing with mainstream institutions, then they are likely to believe that the child can handle his or her own college preparation with minimum assistance. Likewise, students who are used to being cultural brokers are apt to rely on themselves and not expect their parents to play an active part. Of course, having been cultural brokers is no guarantee that students can negotiate the highly complex pathway to college alone. This is where parents' strong moral support for college becomes critical—along with more instrumental forms of support from institutional agents, such as the Futures Project staff. Without strong moral support from parents, even the most efficacious students can be prevented from enrolling or persisting in college, as in cases of family insistence on full-time work after high school or on girls not leaving home.

The dynamics of parent-child roles and relationships would seem to be fundamentally different in this niche than among higher SES families where parents have attended college. When parents depend on their children to negotiate with social institutions and to find their own way to college, there is a role reversal compared to dominant cultural norms; instead of the parent as the role model and expert guide, the child is his or her own guide. Stanton-Salazar (2001) noted this connection between structural conditions and family dynamics for low SES Latino youth: "Macro-forces engender economic conditions, neighborhood ecologies, and relational dynamics that systematically make it difficult if not impossible for immigrant parents to act as authentic and reliable sources of social and institutional support to their children" (156).

By contrast, the hallmark of higher SES parents' role in education is the proactive management of their students' careers (Baker & Stevenson, 1986; Lareau, 1989; McDonough, 1997; Yonezawa, 1997). In such families, college attendance is a given rather than something requiring exhortation and sacrifice. Parents lead the way with instrumental strategies requiring both college knowledge and contact with institutions, such as choosing college preparatory classes and visiting campuses. Higher SES students rely on their parents as role models of college-going and for help in every step of college planning (McDonough, 1997). They enjoy a "home advantage" en route to college like that of upper middle-class elementary students in Lareau (1989). To level the playing field, schools and colleges need to direct far more information and support toward lower SES families who lack this college-going capital.

CONCLUSION: THE VALUE AND LIMITS OF MORAL CAPITAL

As we have seen, immigrant parents' moral support for college consisted of verbal exhortation, encouragement, and *consejos* accompanied by small, behind-the-scenes actions that cleared the way and did no harm to efficacious students. Parents' role as moral supporters was rooted in their limited college knowledge, traditional beliefs, and perceptions of as well as relationships with their children. These social, cultural, and psychosocial influences together shaped families' adaptation to opportunity structures in their ecocultural niche as immigrants.

All the children of parents in the larger study were accepted at 4-year universities; only Antonia's daughter did not enroll due to health problems and a return to Mexico. The influence of parents on these educational outcomes was indirect, like the influence generally of parent involvement on student achievement (Jordan, Orozco, and Averett, 2002; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). Though parents' role in their children's pathway to college was indirect and largely invisible to the school, it was foundational to their children's success. Rather than discourage or forbid their children's mobility aspirations, like some immigrant parents concerned about the opportunity costs of college, those in this study chose to be supportive allies. Students credited their families for motivating them and giving them the fortitude to persist in their goals despite obstacles.

Given the constraints on their college-going economic, cultural, and social capital, these parents drew on a resource they held in abundance and about which they felt confident: their understanding of and experience in teaching respect and correct behavior to their children while conveying the message that hard work, studying, and college were steps on the "right path" in life (Azmitia et al., 1996; Reese, 2002; Reese et al., 1995). I call this intangible resource *moral capital* (Auerbach, 2001, 2004a). This alternative form of capital is part of the "aspirational capital" and "familial capital" in Yosso's (2005) highly generative model of "community cultural wealth"—a set of knowledge, skills, and contacts needed to resist oppression that students of color acquire in their families and communities and bring, unrecognized, to schools.

Moral capital was not only the greatest contribution immigrant parents felt they could make to their children's education but was closely tied to their sense of the broader duties of parenting and child rearing. Parents were meant to provide the moral foundation for effective schooling by exhorting success, pointing the way toward college, and showing their approval through actions within their means that made the way easier for students. Rather than belittling immigrant parents' moral support as negligible because it is indirect and differs from mainstream parent involvement, educators must first respect the value of parents' moral capital and try to understand its meaning and vital necessity in their lives.

Immigrant parents' strong moral support for education, and especially for higher education, represents a historic shift in educational values for Latinos.

Villanueva (1996) documented changes in parent involvement across three generations, from the life lessons of older immigrants to the proactive educational enrichment activities of well-educated, third-generation parents. Reese's (2002) comparative study of Latino immigrant parents and their counterparts in Mexico found that as secondary education became more widely available, parents came to see their role less as teaching their children how to work and more as stressing the value of education for a career and social mobility. Though conveying the value of higher education may seem so obvious as to be unnecessary in higher SES families, in low SES immigrant families it may signal a profound shift. The parents in this study were engaged in a process of family transformation, without the benefit of role models, as they offered their children a level of support for education that they themselves had never received (Auerbach, 2001). Seen in this evolutionary perspective, parents' moral support for college is a notable accomplishment that can help pave the way for first-generation students.

The moral support role has cultural logic for immigrant parents as an ecological adaptation. Yet it clearly presents limitations for helping youth overcome obstacles to educational opportunity in an unequal system. For example, activist parents in Olivos (2003) were frustrated with complacent fellow immigrants who did not get more involved with the school to improve conditions for English learners. U.S.-born Chicano/a high school students in Stanton-Salazar (2001) were disappointed with their parents' inability to provide the information and help they needed to move ahead. The limitations of moral support might be less of an issue if access to advanced courses, college counseling, and other resources were equitably distributed across social groups. On an equal playing field, families of color might not need comprehensive support to counter schools' tendency to reproduce unequal outcomes (Auerbach, 2001, 2004a).

Given these barriers and the complexity of college planning, parents' moral support is necessary but not sufficient to help first-generation Latino students reach their college goals. Moral support may be most effective with students who are already motivated, on track for college, and connected to helpful institutional agents. The Futures Project staff built close relationships with students and provided intensive college planning assistance, including parent meetings. Families often commented that such programs should be available to all students. Indeed, there is a need not only to scale up promising college access programs such as Punteo or AVID, but to make such programs more inclusive of families (Tierney & Auerbach, 2005).

Though clearly a pattern of moral support for education is widespread among Latino families and foundational to student success, many questions remain. We need further research to probe the effect of parents' cautionary tales and reverse role models on children's view of their parents and the parent-child relationship as it affects schooling. How does youth's role as family cultural broker affect their sense of academic self-efficacy as students, their view of their parents, and their pursuit of college? How do immigrant parents' roles evolve over time as their chil-

dren move through the system? What types of school support are most helpful for immigrant parents in expanding their college knowledge and instrumental support?

This study suggests that educators need to honor the many ways that Latino immigrant parents are already involved in the education of their children rather than blame them for not caring about schooling. Educators should recognize moral support and the “invisible” sacrifices that accompany it as indispensable forms of parent engagement that motivate and strengthen many students from immigrant families. Teachers, counselors, and administrators should discuss these strategies openly with parents and colleagues to render them more visible and appreciated. Rather than seeking to minimize or “fix” parents’ moral support stance, educators should salute it and find culturally appropriate ways to build on it to provide even greater support to students.

Immigrant parents who want their children to go to college desperately want more information and support to help their children reach their goals, but may be too isolated or intimidated by schools to seek such help (Auerbach, 2004b). Schools need to take the first step to reach out to parents, to make them feel appreciated and comfortable, to provide connections to other parents and educators in a supportive atmosphere, and to engage parents in learning about college pathways (Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). Perhaps the most valuable source of information for families is personal narratives of college planning and college life by college students, educators, professionals, and fellow parents who look like them (Auerbach, 2004b). This testimony allows parents to make sense of unfamiliar, highly complex information and begin to imagine themselves as the proud parent of a college graduate. Such encouragement, in a climate of dialogue and mutual support, can give immigrant parents the courage and the tools they need to become better informed and to try out new forms of support for college—in addition to the vital foundation of moral support.

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