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The Lived Experiences of Mexican American Adolescent Grandchildren Raised by Their Grandparents: A Phenomenological Study

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James F. Whittenberg

Whittenberg, James F., received his doctor of philosophy in Counseling Studies at Capella University in 2012. This paper is based on his doctoral dissertation. He accepted a dual appointment with The University of Texas at Brownsville and The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley in 2014.

Introduction to the Problem

Although insights into the experiences of grandparents raising grandchildren are emerging, there is little research on the experiences of Mexican American adolescents raised by their grandparents (Goodman & Rao, 2007). Grandparents raising grandchildren is becoming common in the United States. Specifically, U.S. Census data indicated that 6.4 million (16%) children lived with their grandparents, 3.4 million (53%) of these without the presence of either parent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Over 1.5 million (23%) of these grandparents were Mexican Americans, which is a 70% increase since 2000 (Goodman & Rao, 2007). These families were also twice as likely (50%) to live below the poverty level, and at the greatest risk (43%) of not being covered by health insurance. In addition, over 52% of these households resided in or near metropolitan areas, and were low-income families (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Due to the importance of professional school counselors needing to address the concerns of these grandchildren in school (Newsome & Kelly, 2004), it is vital to consider the lived experiences of Mexican American grandchildren raised by their grandparents from the perspective of the grandchild as well as the grandparent (Edwards, 1998).

Statement of the Problem

The gap in the research on this topic consists of concerns of Mexican American adolescent grandchildren raised by their grandparents, including (a) unresolved attachment with the child's parents, (b) emotional issues such as anger, anxiety, depression, and acting-out behaviors, (c) issues related to poverty and socioeconomic

status, (d) differences in acculturation between the grandparents and grandchildren and any language barriers that may exist, (e) immigration and citizenship status, (f) the generation gap, and (g) differences in the level of education of the grandparents and grandchildren (Bullock, 2005; East & Weisner, 2009; Goodman & Rao, 2007; Polo & López, 2009). Wilkey (2007) posits that Mexican immigrants have a higher proportion of unresolved attachment than Mexican Americans living near their family of origin. Furthermore, few qualitative studies have explored how the lived experiences of Mexican American adolescent grandchildren raised by their grandparents connect with the needs of this population (Bullock, 2005; Goodman & Rao, 2007). Finally, the data collected in this study indicates several relevant implications for professional school counselors working with the population studied, which include promoting advocacy, providing referral resources, fostering student achievement, and collaborating with these families and the entire school community.

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of the phenomenological study was to explore the question: “What are the lived experiences of Mexican American adolescent grandchildren aged 12 to 18 being raised by their grandparents?” A secondary purpose was to contribute to scientific knowledge by investigating this research topic in a meaningful way. Positive benefits for exploring the lived experiences of Mexican American adolescent grandchildren raised by their grandparents were identified. Health and social services were subsequently encouraged to reach out to Mexican American custodial grandparents by involving community representatives in the intervention process and making culturally sound recommendations for educational practices and development of government programs (Kelley, Yorker, Whitley, & Sipe, 2001).

Methodology

The methodological model that was implemented in this study is the transcendental phenomenology model proposed by Moustakas (1994). The three core processes are epoché, transcendental-phenomenological reduction, and imaginative variation. According to Moustakas, epoché is the setting aside of prejudgments or preconceptions with an unbiased, receptive presence. This is vital in order to identify common themes that emerge among the participants (Finlay, 2009; Groenewald, 2004).

The second core process, transcendental phenomenological reduction, consists of a textural description of the relationship between phenomenon and self. Moustakas (1994) defined the steps to transcendental phenomenological reduction as: 1) bracketing (setting everything else aside so that the research process is rooted solely on the topic and question); 2) horizontalization (deleting irrelevant, repetitive, and overlapping statements); 3) delimiting horizons or meanings (the textural and invariant qualities of the phenomenon experienced that stand out); 4) invariant qualities and themes (clustering non-repetitive, non-overlapping constituents into themes); 5) individual textural descriptions (development of descriptive integrations of the invariant constituents and themes of each research participant); and 6) composite textural description (development of an integration of all individual textural descriptions into a group or universal textural description representing the group as a whole).

The third core process, imaginative variation, involves the utilization of imagination to seek a structural description of the underlying and precipitating factors that account for the phenomenon that is being experienced. Moustakas (1994) outlined the steps to imaginative variation that include: 1) systematic varying of the possible structural meanings that underlie the textural meanings (varying perspectives of the phenomenon from different vantage points, such as opposite meanings and various roles); 2) constructing a list of the structural qualities of the experience; 3) recognizing the underlying themes or contexts that account for the emergence of the phenomenon; 4) developing structural themes by clustering the structural qualities into themes; 5) considering the universal structures that precipitate feelings and thoughts with reference to the phenomenon (such as time, space, bodily concerns, materiality, causality, relation to self, or relation to others); 6) developing individual structural descriptions (integrating the structural qualities and themes into an individual structural description of the experience; and 7) compiling a composite structural description (integrating all of the individual structural descriptions into a group or universal structural description of the experience).

Once the three core processes of transcendental phenomenology (epoché, transcendental-phenomenological reduction, and imaginative variation) have been completed, a synthesis of meanings and essences can be extracted from the data analyses. According to Moustakas (1994), this final step in his phenomenological research process is the intuitive integration of the composite textural and structural descriptions into a unified statement of the essences of the experience of the phenomenon as a whole. The essences of any experience are never totally exhausted. The fundamental textural-structural synthesis represents the essences at a particular time and place from the vantage point of an individual researcher following an exhaustive imaginative and reflective study of the phenomenon.

Sampling Design

Potential participants in the study were selected from Mexican American adolescents raised by their grandparents who were identified through the demographic database of a school district with over 50,000 students in a U.S.–Mexico border town in Texas. The principal researcher developed a recruitment letter sent by U.S. mail and e-mail to the grandparents of potential research participants. This letter contained the researcher's contact information for grandparents to initiate the first contact to express interest in participating in this study. The addresses were obtained through the school district's demographic database and mailed to the grandparents by the school district's research, assessment, and evaluation office.

The researcher subsequently held face-to-face screening interviews with potential participants and their grandparents. The principal researcher was in the room alone to ask the interview questions. Screening interviews were conducted for approximately four weeks, when 20 eligible prospects responded with interest in participating in the study. The research method that was employed was phenomenological research because the purpose was to understand lived experiences of Mexican American adolescents raised by their grandparents from the perspective of the grandchild. Using a non-probability design using purposive sampling, nine participants were selected for inclusion in the study.

Interview Questions

Moustakas (1994) recommended two general questions for a phenomenological study: “What has been experienced in terms of the phenomena?” and “What situations have typically affected the experiences of the phenomena?” The phenomenon in this particular study was Mexican American adolescents raised by their grandparents. Therefore, the two broad, general interview questions that were developed for this study included:

1. What has it been like to be a Mexican American teenager raised by your grandparents?
2. What experiences have influenced or affected you significantly?

Moustakas (1994) further recommended subsidiary questions to further facilitate the obtaining of rich, vital, substantive descriptions of each participant’s experience of the phenomenon in question, such as the following, to facilitate full disclosure of the experiences of research participants: 1) “What dimensions, incidents, and people intimately connected with the experience stand out to you?”; 2) “How did the experience affect you?”; 3) “What changes do you associate with the experience?”; 4) “How did the experience affect significant others in your life?”; 5) “What feelings were generated by the experience?”; 6) “What thoughts stood out to you?”; 7) “What bodily changes or states were you aware of at the time?”; and 8) “Have you shared all that is significant with reference to the experience?” As a result, the following subsidiary questions were developed:

1. What do you believe is important for someone to know about your life?
2. How have your experiences affected you?
3. How have your experiences changed you?
4. How did your experiences affect your relationships with your siblings and friends?
5. What feelings do you have about your experiences?
6. What thoughts stand out to you?
7. Is there anything else you want to share or that I haven’t asked you?

Data Collection

The interviews were opened by presenting the research questions: “What has it been like to be a Mexican American teenager raised by your grandparents?” and “What experiences have influenced or affected you significantly?” Subsidiary questions were used in order to ensure that the participant remained on the research topic. The participants took between 60 to 90 minutes to answer the questions, and all interviews were recorded via audio tape. Following the interview, the audio tapes were transcribed by the researcher. Once transcription was completed, the participants had the opportunity to read their interview transcriptions in order to validate the data collected.

Data was analyzed by employing Moustakas’ (1994) procedures to extract common themes found in the transcriptions. Creswell (2008) recommended that interview data be analyzed through transcription of the taped interview sessions of

personal accounts from the open-ended questions. Each of the data sources was analyzed in a manner where the content of each paragraph was assessed. Next, each paragraph was assigned a theme indicating the predominant theme it contained. Finally, the themes themselves were analyzed to generate a textural and structural description of the lived experiences and the essence of the phenomenon in question (Moustakas, 1994).

Data Analysis

Once all the interviews were completed, the audio tapes were carefully transcribed by the researcher using a computer program that helped to identify common themes reported by the participants and integrate them into a meaningful experience. The goal was to identify common themes in the lived experiences described by the participants. These themes were then categorized by identifying statements that related to the topic and by grouping statements into meaningful units. In addition, divergent perspectives were sought from each participant. The final step was to construct a composite overall description of the phenomenon as reported by the participants (Moustakas, 1994).

In collecting and presenting the data, a modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen Method of Analysis of Phenomenological Data (Moustakas, 1994) was used. Obtaining a full description on the experience of the phenomenon in question and verbatim transcript of the experience consisted of the following steps: (a) refraining from judgment; (b) recording all relevant statements; (c) listing each theme or meaning unit of the experience; (d) relating and clustering the invariant meaning units into themes; (e) synthesizing the themes into verbatim descriptions of the experience; (f) constructing a textural description of the structures of the experience; and (g) constructing a composite textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of the experience, integrating all individual textural-structural descriptions into a universal description of the experience representing the population studied (Moustakas, 1994).

As data analyses proceeded, all meaning units (statements) and themes were analyzed and listed chronologically. A chart was used to develop the composite textural-structural experiences. The analysis of the data, according to Creswell (2008), should have been holistic if a phenomenological approach is used. The data was dissected thoroughly before preparing the final analysis in order to retain a global sense of the data and avoid passing judgment on any aspect of the description based upon the results of data analysis.

Composite Textural Description

After the first step of bracketing (setting everything else aside so that the research process is rooted solely on the topic and question), the second step of the transcendental phenomenology model (Moustakas, 1994) was the development of a composite textural description. First, the textural and invariant qualities of the phenomenon experienced that stood out were clustered into themes. Second, descriptive integrations of the invariant constituents of each participant were developed. Finally, an integration of all individual textural descriptions was developed into a universal textural description representing the whole group. These universal textures consisted of experiences related to the phenomenon shared by all of the individuals. The textural themes that emerged in this study included: (a) socioeconomic and financial concerns, (b) stress and emotional issues,

(c) differences in acculturation, (d) language barriers, (e) differences in level of education, and (f) presence of a generation gap.

Socioeconomic and financial concerns. There were several textural themes to emerge from the meaning units of the interviews. The first textural theme to emerge in six of the interviews was socioeconomic and financial concerns. However, these hardships did not negatively impact the grandparent-grandchild relationships beyond occasional quarrels and conflicts that often occur during adolescence.

All of the grandparents continued to be nurturing and supportive and in several cases extended family members helped by providing financial support. However, economic problems impacted the grandchildren's relationships with their peers, particularly at younger ages. While many of their friends shared similar economic hardships in their families, others wore designer clothing and owned cellular phones. Regardless, the grandchildren were mature enough to understand their circumstances and accepted the socioeconomic concerns and financial needs of their family.

Stress and emotional issues. A second textural theme that emerged from the meaning units of all of the interviews was the impact of stress and emotional issues. It had been difficult living with grandparents and at the same time missing parents. These issues exacerbated stress among each of the adolescents.

It was apparent that although these emotional issues did not result in negative grandparent-grandchild interactions, the concerns did lead to understandable stress-induced moods, such as short periods of depression and feelings of anger and resentment. Despite difficult circumstances, in each case, the grandchild revealed a maturity beyond their age to overcome these emotional issues. However, the differences in acculturation between grandparent and grandchild also became apparent.

Differences in acculturation. A third textural theme that emerged from the meaning units of all of the interviews was the differences in acculturation. This theme was voiced by the grandchildren largely as being unable to listen to popular American music on the radio and view their favorite television programs. As a result, the grandchildren at times were isolated from conversations with their peers in that they did not have access to the radio and television stations that most American adolescents enjoyed. In other words, the grandchildren were more highly acculturated in American preferences of entertainment than their grandparents were.

In addition, the grandchildren were exposed to natural healing traditions of the Mexican culture such as seeking medical assistance from a folk healer (*currander*) rather than a family physician or a mental health professional. Participant 4 had relocated from other areas of the United States had not been exposed to such traditions but eventually grew to understand and accept them.

Language barriers. A fourth theme that emerged from the meaning units of only one of the interviews was language barriers. The grandparents of participant 4 were monolingual Spanish and initially had difficulty communicating with their grandchild who had come to live with them from New Jersey because the child's mother was hospitalized with bipolar disorder. The grandchild was limited in speaking and understanding the Spanish language, and she reported that it took a few months to become more fluent and improve communication with her grandparents who did not speak English.

Although only one grandchild revealed a language barrier with the grandparents, it is important to note that the majority of grandchildren shared that it was necessary to translate from English to Spanish for their grandparents. Some of the grandchildren expressed feelings of embarrassment and frustration at having to translate for their grandparents, while others assumed this responsibility in stride. Nonetheless, language barriers were a theme that did emerge.

Differences in level of education. A fifth textural theme that emerged from the meaning units of seven interviews was the differences in the level of education, as in the case of participant 1 and the grandparents, discussed later. Many of the grandparents did not finish high school and two did not receive a formal education at all.

Consequently, the grandparents were unable to assist the grandchildren with their homework. In addition, the grandchildren needed to develop an intrinsic motivation to maintain academic success. Inevitably, this led to increased pressure to receive high grades and pursue scholarships for college or develop specific skills for the workforce. It was interesting to note that the grandchildren in large part accepted this challenge and were determined to graduate from high school not only for themselves, but to make their grandparents proud of them as well.

Presence of a generation gap. A sixth textural theme that emerged from the meaning units of all of the interviews was the presence of a generation gap. This was created by changing cultural values, level of acculturation, and peer expectations of the grandchildren. One predominate issue was that of autonomy. Largely the grandparents preferred their grandchildren to stay home rather than go out to socialize with their friends. This led to disappointment and frustration in the grandchildren. Participant 2 shared that she believed that her grandparents were being overprotective because her own parents had not maintained her safety. She and participant 6 interpreted this overprotection as a way of their grandparents eliminating mistakes made with their own child, the grandchild's parent.

A second issue that contributed to the generation gap was a difference in parenting style. Some of the grandchildren drew comparisons between the level of strictness of their grandparents and their parents. Some of the grandchildren cited that their grandparents were not as authoritarian as their parents were. One grandchild attributed this to the conflicting feelings her grandparents possessed due to an inability to spoil her as a grandchild and the need to be a firm disciplinarian. On the other hand, some of the grandchildren viewed their grandparents as being stricter than their parents were. These parents were somewhat uninvolved in the lives of their own children, or even abandoned their children, which in part led to Participant 7 being placed with his grandparents.

Effect of differences in values and expectations. Despite the differences between the grandparents and grandchildren found in the textural themes, there was an obvious high level of love (*amor*) and respect (*respeto*) between them. This concept was often encased with temporary and conflicted feelings of sadness, anger, and frustration. However, the grandchildren went to great lengths to avoid disrespecting their grandparents because of the presence of a high regard for family as well as for their elders. The responsibility and maturity depicted by the grandchildren is further explained in the structural themes outlined in the following section, which is a composite structural

description compiled and integrated from the interview transcripts from all nine interviews.

Composite Structural Description

The next procedure in the third step of the transcendental phenomenology model, referred to by Moustakas (1994) as imaginative variation, was the development of a composite structural description. This process encompassed the compilation of all the individual structural descriptions into a universal structural description of the experience. These universal structures consisted of thoughts and feelings in reference to how the phenomenon had been experienced by the individual. In relation to this study, these structural themes included both individual emotions and cultural values of Mexican American adolescents being raised by their grandparents. The structural themes that emerged in this study included: (a) unconditional love, (b) determination to succeed, (c) family obligation, (d) frustration, (e) respect, and (f) maturity.

Unconditional love or *amor incondicional*. There were several structural themes to emerge from the meaning units of the interview with participant 1. Unconditional love (*amor incondicional*) was the first structural theme to emerge in the meaning units and textual themes of several participants. Unconditional love is freely given regardless of circumstances rather than being earned or deserved, and should not be mistaken with dedication or obligation. The grandchildren expressed their love for their grandparents as more than a mere expression of gratitude for raising them or a cultural obligation to family. Unconditional love was expressed quite eloquently by each participant.

For the grandchildren, unconditional love meant being available to their grandparents, devoting time to their grandparents, and assisting their grandparents with anything they needed without the expectations of compensation. In addition, despite the financial concerns, emotional issues, life stressors, differences in acculturation and education, and the presence of a generation gap, the grandchildren expressed genuine love for their grandparents.

Determination to succeed or *determinación*. A second structural theme to emerge in the interviews with participant 1 was the determination to succeed (*determinación*). Each of the adolescent grandchildren had developed the motivation to graduate from high school and pursue postsecondary education. In most cases, it was not necessary for the grandparents to motivate or supervise the grandchildren. For participant 2, the determination to succeed was driven by a sense of responsibility without the need of any external influences, even though the obligation to the family was quite important.

Family obligation or *familismo*. A third structural theme to emerge in the interviews with the participants was family obligation (*familismo*). The importance of extended family helping each other was present in the descriptions revealed by all of the grandchildren. Many of the grandchildren stated that they had aunts, uncles, and cousins who would visit their grandparents often and assist with household chores, lawn maintenance, and even financial support. Participant 3 specifically mentioned the importance of family.

One grandchild decided on her own to live with her grandmother and provide caregiving support rather than live with her parents in Mexico. Another grandchild lived with her grandparents rather than travel north with her parents who were migrant workers. Another grandchild chose to live with her grandparents rather than her aunt and

uncle when her parents were deployed overseas in the army. Yet another grandchild chose to attend a local university and continue to live with his grandparents. The cultural obligation to family was also presented by the grandchildren as they described how their grandparents sometimes needed help completing household chores, going grocery shopping, traveling to their medical appointments, and picking up prescription medications.

Frustration or *frustración*. A fourth structural theme to emerge in the interviews with the participants was frustration (*frustración*). All of the grandchildren described their desire to have more autonomy and to socialize with their friends. Many of their grandparents preferred for them to stay home rather than go to the mall or simply hang out with their friends in the neighborhood, as emphasized by participant 6.

Because the grandchildren also possessed a sense of obligation to stay home with their grandparents for caregiving and to assist with household chores, they had mixed feelings about meeting family obligations and needing autonomy. However, regardless of the degree of frustration, all of the grandchildren found positive means to cope with their feelings in order to maintain an acceptable level of respect for their grandparents.

Respect or *respeto*. A fifth structural theme to emerge in the interviews with participant 1 was respect (*respeto*). All of the grandchildren expressed positive feelings of regard for their grandparents and their own conduct was representative of that esteem. Participant 6 explained that she would not blame her problems on her grandmother or project her frustrations with her because it would be disrespectful.

The respect the grandchildren possessed for their grandparents was not only due to appreciation and gratefulness, but cultural expectations. Participant 4 stated that, out of respect for her grandparents, she would change the channel to avoid hearing profane language. The presence of respect in the grandchildren further led to another structural theme common to all of the grandchildren, which was maturity.

Maturity or *madurez*. A sixth and most predominant structural theme to emerge in the interviews with participant 1 was maturity (*madurez*). The grandchildren all described how, out of necessity, they were able to respond to their unique situations appropriately. Although emotions were difficult to overcome at a young age, the grandchildren learned to manage their behavior. The grandchildren assisted with household chores and completing errands that needed attention, often without the need to be asked. This sense of responsibility helped participant 7 realize that adversity sometimes requires an individual to mature early.

Connectedness of structural themes. It was apparent that love, respect, determination, obligation, and maturity were all interrelated. These qualities among the grandchildren were inherent and further developed through the grandparents who were raising them. In addition, many of these qualities were also expectations of the culture in which they lived and the Catholic beliefs and spirituality of the families. Finally, all of the grandchildren displayed a resilience to overcome the difficult obstacles in their lives.

Composite Textural and Structural Synthesis: The Essence

Moustakas (1994) defined essence as “That which is common or universal, the condition or equality without which a thing would not be what it is” (p. 100). The final step of the transcendental phenomenology model required integrating the elements from the composite textural descriptions and the composite structural descriptions into a

universal description of the experience representing the group as a whole. This synthesis of elements yielded the essence of the phenomenon under study (Moustakas, 1994). In this study, a composite textural and structural description was developed highlighting the lived experiences of Mexican American adolescent grandchildren raised by their grandparents. The essence of these experiences served to discover the perceptions of the participants regarding their lived experiences and to provide valuable information to professional school counselors and other professionals working with this population.

The invariant qualities or essence (Moustakas, 1994) extracted from the data is that the lived experiences of Mexican American adolescent grandchildren raised by their grandparents were challenging yet were also overcome with resolve and resilience. These two universal essences were present for all of the grandchildren, indicating the importance of professionals working with this population to be mindful of these aspects of the phenomenon. The grandchildren in this study did not have to be asked to be respectful and responsible; they simply behaved in this manner. They were determined to set an example for their siblings and perform academically to the very best of their ability. The grandchildren's stories were compelling and candid, often depicting pride in their extended families and cultural heritage. These nine individuals described their lived experiences in detail and why they were significant. Their stories painted vivid pictures of difficult, yet successful periods of adjustment in their lives. The grandchildren discussed their personal, familial, social, educational, and vocational experiences and aspirations for the future. More importantly, all of the grandchildren described how their grandparents were positive influences on their lives and how the circumstances surrounding living with them shaped their futures for the better.

Across the interviews, the grandchildren recalled countless acts of unconditional love throughout their lived experiences. This was reciprocated through taking on tremendous responsibilities of caring for their grandparents regardless of how their lives changed. Many of the grandchildren indicated that these new responsibilities did contribute to feelings of frustration at times. In some instances, the grandchildren were hurt, angered, and confused about adjusting to life with their grandparents, causing them to be resentful. However, regardless of how strict or unfair their grandparents may have seemed, and despite the mistakes the grandchildren occasionally made, they understood that they were loved unconditionally by their grandparents and that they desired for them to have successful and happy lives. In conclusion, these grandchildren overcame difficult obstacles with the nurturing and support of their grandparents.

Limitations

Three potential limitations may have arisen in studying the lived experiences of Mexican American adolescent grandchildren raised by their grandparents. One, distortions in the perception of relationships could have occurred due to the generation gap between the grandparents and grandchildren (Bernal & Anuncibay, 2008). Specifically, young children may have underestimated the lifestyle contributions provided by aging caregivers. Two, maturation may have impacted the relationship between grandchildren and grandparent caregivers as adolescents desire more autonomy while emerging into young adulthood (Creswell, 2008). In order to maintain empirical consistency, the grandchildren selected to participate in this study were approximately the same age, and the length of interviews for each participant remained consistent. Third,

and finally, it was entirely possible that grandchildren who possessed higher levels of emotional well-being may have been more likely to develop close relationships with their grandparents (Goodman & Silverstein, 2001). The reverse may have also been true, in that grandparents may have been just as likely to develop close relationships with their grandchildren even if levels of emotional well-being of the grandchildren were relatively low.

In addition, the survey interviews were conducted solely in English. The researcher was not fluent in Spanish, and the IRB did not approve a translator for the study. For this reason, potential participants who were monolingual Spanish speakers were excluded from participation in this study. Due to this limitation, it was recommended that future research be conducted that will include participants who are fluent in Spanish. Future research with interviewers who are fluent in the Spanish language would serve to facilitate qualitative interviews of participants who were monolingual Spanish-speaking or had limited proficiency with the English language.

Suggestions for Future Research

Based on the results of this study, it can be concluded that further research is needed to explore fully the phenomenon in question. Education, mental health, and government officials need to know and understand the plight of Mexican American custodial grandchildren and their unique needs in order for appropriate services and resources to be made available to support these new and changing families. Furthermore, professional school counselors providing services to this population can have a positive and lasting effect on these families. Educational, career, personal, and social support by professional school counselors will impact how these families live through providing vital referrals to government and community agencies for assistance.

In addition, not enough research has been done to understand this phenomenon from the perspective of the grandchild. Future research could more fully investigate (a) the influence of cultural and ethnic heritage on the care of Mexican American children raised by other family members, (b) the distortions in the perception of relationships possibly due to the generation gap between Mexican American grandparents and custodial grandchildren, (c) the perceptions of monolingual Spanish-speaking custodial grandchildren, (d) the impact of raising grandchildren on the spousal relationship of Mexican American grandparents, and (e) and the impact of marital status of the grandparent (i.e., widowed, divorced, separated, or unmarried) on Mexican American grandchildren. Furthermore, studying this phenomenon in the context of resiliency theory may also be useful in the future study of these families based on the reason for placement of the grandchild with the grandparents.

By studying the meaning units, textural and structural descriptions, and composite synthesis and essence of this phenomenon, it was the intention that the results of this study would uncover and reveal the difficulties that are faced by Mexican American adolescent grandchildren being raised by their grandparents. As can be seen by this study, these grandchildren not only felt strongly about their obligation to family, but also recognized the priceless rewards that can come from the experience. As participant 1 put it, “My grandmother is more than a parent to me. She is my friend, my everything.”

Conclusion

Custodial grandparenting continues to be a topic of discussion in the counseling field. The areas of social and behavioral sciences, education, and policymaking may be positively influenced by an increased awareness of the lived experiences of Mexican American custodial grandchildren. It is important that as our society continues to become more diverse, we pay attention to the needs of minority groups, especially minority children. Mexican American custodial grandchildren and their families have distinctive needs, which may be different from other ethnic minority groups in the United States. Walker (2007) suggested that it is through research, education, and changes in our public policies that one day we will be able to better attend to the specific needs of this population through a broader knowledge of this unique phenomenon.

While there are similarities in the themes that emerged from the data analysis to previous studies of custodial grandchildren, the findings in this study are unique to Mexican American adolescent grandchildren being raised by their grandparents. Three universal themes that stand out as distinctively occurring among Mexican American adolescents being raised by their grandparents are unconditional love (*amor incondicional*), respect (*respeto*), and family obligation (*familismo*). Mexican American families maintain a sense of unity and support through the cultural values of respect, pride, love, and obligation expected of extended family members to include the responsibility of raising children and caregiving for the elderly (Arredondo & Rodriguez, 2005). In addition to these cultural expectations, extended family members are largely expected to provide financial and emotional support for the family. On a side note, many Mexican Americans prefer to be distinguished from Hispanics from other countries of origin, such as Puerto Rico, Cuba, Spain, and countries in Central and South America.

The Spanish language also has a direct connection to their personal identity and reflects their cultural heritage as well. Being fluent in both the English and Spanish languages is highly salient for the realization of Mexican American identity, particularly in younger generations. The retention of the Spanish language, both for cultural identity and for functioning as a member of a nuclear and extended family, rarely hinders the rate at which Mexican American adolescents acquire proficiency of the English language and assimilate into American culture. However, in older generations, it tends to perpetuate the need for a linguistic and cultural mediator. The language and identity issues experienced by grandparents who are first- and second-generation Mexican Americans are therefore fundamentally distinct from the types of issues faced by grandchildren who have been fully immersed in the predominately American culture.

In conclusion, despite the presence of a generation gap, the acculturation of Mexican American adolescents allows them to foster a unique connectedness to their grandparents who may more strongly identify with Mexican values and identity. Furthermore, interdependence, rather than independence, is valued because it strengthens the extended family and provides for reciprocal services and support systems (Goodman & Rao, 2007). For these reasons, most of the grandchildren in this study indicated that quality and consistent communication existed with their grandparents. In addition, it is worthy to note that the grandchildren were able and willing to share their experiences and verbalize their perceptions of being a Mexican American adolescent raised by their grandparents. Undoubtedly, the cultural and familial dynamics present in these families

can be expected to influence how professional school counselors and other professionals work with these young people and help them to develop academically, vocationally, personally, and socially. These efforts can further serve to increase the involvement of community representatives and government agencies in the intervention process and help improve culturally sound recommendations for practice and program development for all Mexican American adolescents and custodial grandchildren as well.

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