Neighborhood Experiences of Immigrant Families with Young Children in the United States

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April 27, 2018

To appear in H. Chu & B. Thelamour (Eds.), *Navigating systems*. New York: Springer.

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We are grateful for support from the Foundation for Child Development, the Doris Duke Fellowship for the Promotion of Child Well-Being, and the Institute of Educational Sciences (R305A150027).

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Abstract

Neighborhoods constitute a microsystem theorized to be of great importance for immigrant families, with the potential to support and facilitate families’ transitions to life in the United States. Yet, few studies examine immigrants’ perceptions of their neighborhoods and the extent to which different aspects of these neighborhoods, such as safety or social cohesion, may shape the ways in which immigrant families interact with other microsystems in which they are embedded. This chapter uses longitudinal, ethnographic data to explore the ways in which neighborhoods matter for the child care choices of low-income immigrant mothers. In considering the mesosystem linkages between neighborhoods and child care, several themes emerge: Mothers discussed concerns about crime and safety, availability of neighborhood resources, and the meaning of living in co-ethnic compared with predominantly European American or more diverse communities. The bioecological model is used throughout the chapter to guide our understanding of the experiences of immigrant families with young children in the United States.

Neighborhood Experiences of Immigrant Families with Young Children in the United States

Historically, neighborhoods have played a key role in immigrant families' post-migration experiences (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996). Moreover, neighborhoods may be a potential mechanism through which differences in social and economic well-being emerge among immigrant families, as well as in comparison to their non-immigrant counterparts (García Coll & Szalacha, 2004; Leventhal, Xue, & Brooks-Gunn, 2006; Pong & Hao, 2007; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996, 2001). However, few studies have examined the specific neighborhood aspects that are theorized to be of importance for immigrants, and even fewer have done so with families of young children as a focus (Pong & Hao, 2007; Takanishi, 2004).

This chapter focuses on immigrant mothers of young children embedded in their neighborhood microsystems. In addition, formal child care settings are considered as a microsystem of interest for these families, leading to an exploration of the intersection of neighborhoods and child care decision-making at the mesosystem level. We draw on longitudinal ethnographic data to give attention to issues of diversity in immigrants' experiences, and investigate process aspects of low-income immigrant mothers' decision-making around child care. With this lens, we explore how low-income immigrant mothers' neighborhood perceptions and experiences might shape their child care preferences and use of different types of child care.

Immigrant Families' Neighborhoods

Immigrants often settle in communities comprised of other immigrants (i.e., ethnic enclaves) with a shared language, values, practices, and possibly social ties (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996). Such neighborhoods may facilitate the adjustment of individual families in the United States by communicating knowledge of local resources (Yoshikawa & Kholoptseva, 2013), as well as through reinforcing positive cultural values, such as norms around parental authority

(García Coll & Szalacha, 2004; Shields & Behrman, 2004). These immigrant neighborhoods, however, are often more disadvantaged than neighborhoods with fewer foreign-born households (e.g., rates of poverty, public assistance, education levels; Leventhal et al., 2006; Pong & Hao, 2007), and thus may lack many institutional resources that can benefit families with young children. Yet, when immigrant families are able to access community resources, these resources can act as key protective factors for families' well-being (Fuligni, 2012; Leventhal & Shuey, 2014).

As immigrants may lack familiarity with resources available in the United States (Chaudry et al., 2011; Simpkins, Delgado, Price, Quach, & Starbuck, 2012), low availability of services within their neighborhoods may create steep barriers for families trying to adjust to mainstream U.S. values, norms, and practices. Limited access to quality resources is likely to serve as a source of risk for immigrant children, particularly around academic achievement (García Coll & Marks, 2012). Similarly, with few institutional supports for child-rearing, immigrant parents may feel isolated and less able to act as advocates for themselves and their children. Alternatively, to the extent that immigrant parents are deterred from using low-quality resources, their children may be protected from harm and demonstrate resilience.

Although immigrants are becoming increasingly dispersed across the United States, they continue to concentrate in urban areas that are traditional "immigrant gateways" (Hernandez, 2004; Marrow, 2011). Increasing residential segregation between immigrants and non-immigrants is likely to exacerbate many of the differences between communities that historically are home to one group or the other (Cutler, Glaeser, & Vigdor, 2008; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Despite the potential tension between the benefits and drawbacks of immigrant neighborhoods, very little research has attempted to identify how immigrants perceive their neighborhoods, including how neighborhood social conditions and access to resources may support immigrant families in the face of broader socioeconomic disadvantage.

Child Care as a Neighborhood Institutional Resource

Child care is important for families with young children both as an educational and developmental support for children (Crosnoe, 2006, 2007) and as a means through which parents can engage in the workforce (Chaudry, Henly, & Meyers, 2010; Weber, 2011). Local availability of child care resources can be a powerful determinant of how well child care supports these dual goals for families: Use of more or less formal types of child care is linked with the relative availability of each in families' neighborhoods (Coley, Votruba-Drzal, Collins, & Miller 2014). Notably, when there is greater per capita availability of child care in communities, low-income parents and non-English speaking parents have an increased likelihood of using child care centers (Fuller, Kagan, Caspary, & Gauthier, 2002; Hirshberg, Huang, & Fuller, 2005), highlighting the importance of local institutions. For immigrant families in particular, transportation and lack of trust or familiarity with providers outside of the community may create barriers to accessing child care outside of the neighborhood (Matthews & Jang, 2007; Simpkins et al., 2012). Unfortunately, there is some indication that given population growth in immigrant neighborhoods, child care availability has not kept pace with demand (Hernandez, Denton, & Macartney, 2011). Further, quality child care is generally less available in more disadvantaged neighborhoods (Adams, Tout, & Zaslow, 2007; Burchinal, Nelson, Carlson, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008; Fuller et al., 2002; García Coll & Fuller, 2010; Hatfield, Lower, Cassidy, & Faldowski, 2015), and is not widely available in immigrant and language minority communities (Matthews & Jang, 2007).

Beyond availability of child care, neighborhood ethnic composition may be important for shaping parents’ knowledge of and decisions regarding child care. In neighborhoods with higher concentrations of Hispanic residents, as well as neighborhoods with greater concentrations of residents who do not speak English, the average age of enrollment in child care is higher than in neighborhoods with fewer Hispanic and non-English speaking residents, net of neighborhood socioeconomic conditions (Fram & Kim, 2008). Discrimination also may play a role, with immigrant families living in neighborhoods with fewer co-ethnic residents experiencing more discrimination and, in turn, engaging less with neighborhood resources (Simpkins et al., 2012). Conversely, when Hispanic immigrant families live in communities where Spanish is spoken regularly outside of the home, parents are more comfortable enrolling their children in child care programs where only English is spoken, than when families live in communities where Spanish is not a primary language (Tobin, Arzubiaga, & Adair, 2013).

There are also hints in the literature that neighborhood social networks may support immigrant parents in finding and using child care and related resources for their children (Burchinal et al., 2008; Chaudry et al., 2011; Shuey & Leventhal, 2018; Yoshikawa, 2011; Yoshikawa & Kholoptseva, 2013). However, in the case of close-knit communities, where members tend to be similar to one another, social connections may restrict the range and types of information that parents have available to share with one another (Chaudry et al., 2010). Along these lines, immigrant parents with large neighborhood social networks enrolled their children in a greater range of child care programs, including center-based care, in comparison with immigrant parents with small neighborhood social networks, who tended to use either informal care or family child care programs (Chaudry et al., 2011; Shuey & Leventhal, 2018).

Linking Families, Neighborhoods, and Child Care: The Mesosystem

On average, immigrant families use formal child care at lower rates than non-immigrant families; however, as the discussion of child care as a neighborhood resource suggests, the reasons for this disparity are likely complex and shaped by numerous systems, extending far beyond family preference (Brandon, 2004; Crosnoe, 2007). Understanding how immigrant families with young children perceive their neighborhoods and learn about child care opportunities is important for several reasons. First, children who attend quality early education settings enter kindergarten with an advantage compared with children who lack these early experiences (Belsky et al., 2007; Burchinal, Magnuson, Powell, & Hong, 2015; Fuller, Holloway, & Liang, 1996; Gormley & Phillips, 2005; Loeb, Fuller, Kagan, & Carrol, 2004). Children from households where English is not the primary language are especially likely to benefit from enriching child care experiences (Burchinal et al., 2015; Gormley & Phillips, 2005; Hernandez et al., 2007; Magnuson, Lahaie, & Waldfogel, 2006). Given the increasing share of young children in the United States who are from immigrant households, ensuring that all families have access to high-quality child care programs is likely to create societal benefits into the future, as these children grow-up through U.S. school systems and themselves seek employment.

Second, parents benefit in various ways from knowing their children are in safe, enriching settings. For one, parents may participate in the labor force or seek additional educational and training opportunities. Among immigrant parents, such opportunities may include learning about how to transfer degrees and credentials from their home countries to use in the United States, or improving English language skills. Any such activities are likely to support their children’s well-being because family poverty is one of the strongest correlates of and risk factors for children’s developmental outcomes (Duncan, Magnuson, & Votruba-Drzal, 2015; Small, 2006, 2009). A two-generational or family approach in child care settings may be beneficial for immigrant parents by helping them gain familiarity with U.S. education systems, thereby enabling them to participate and advocate for their children and themselves (Karoly & Gonzalez, 2011; Takanishi, 2004).

Mesosystems, linkages between microsystems, can be difficult to assess and analyze in meaningful ways (Wachs, 2015). In the remainder of this chapter we present a longitudinal qualitative methodological approach to understanding both the neighborhood microsystem, and linkages between immigrant families' experiences and perceptions in their neighborhoods and use of formal, center-based child care settings for their young children. The results from this approach suggest that immigrant mothers' neighborhood experiences do shape, to some extent, perceptions of child care options. The Discussion section describes implications of these findings for future research on immigrant families using Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Method

Data were drawn from the ethnographic component of Welfare, Children, and Families: A Three City Study, a longitudinal, multi-method study of the well-being of low-income children and families in the wake of welfare reform.

Sample and Data

Two hundred and fifty-six families with young children in moderate- and high-poverty neighborhoods in Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio were recruited to participate in the ethnographic component of the Three City Study during 1999/2000. Ethnographers recruited families from formal child-care settings, the Women, Infants, and Children program, neighborhood community centers, local welfare offices, churches, and other public assistance agencies in each of the three cities. A focal child (age 2 to 4) was identified within each family, and that child's female primary caregiver ("mother") was interviewed on a range of topics over a series of visits with the ethnographer. Families were visited an average of once or twice per month for 12 to 18 months and then every six months thereafter through 2003, providing information across the span of four years in most cases. Interview topics were many, but included experiences with child care and neighborhood perceptions.

Ethnographers conducted interviews and observations with participants in each city and were matched with families in terms of race/ethnicity and language; interviews were conducted in both English and Spanish, based on mothers' preferences. "Structured discovery" was used to gather information from families: in-depth interviews were focused on specific topics (e.g., child care) but allowed flexibility to capture unexpected information (Cherlin, Burton, Hurt, & Purvin, 2004; Winston et al., 1999). Interviews were either transcribed or summarized by the ethnographers with support from qualitative research staff in each city; interviews conducted in Spanish were typically summarized in English, rather than being transcribed.

Of the 256 mothers interviewed as part of the ethnography, 35 reported a place of birth outside of the mainland United States and were therefore considered immigrants; women born in Puerto Rico were considered social immigrants. Thirty four of the 35 immigrants identified in this manner resided in Boston or Chicago; only one immigrant resided in San Antonio. In addition, only one immigrant was identified as White (she was born in Poland), whereas all other immigrants were identified as either Hispanic or Black. Given the divergent policy circumstances and differential sampling in the three cities (Winston et al., 1999), as well as the different contexts of reception for families of color in comparison with immigrants of European origin (García Coll & Szalacha, 2004; Portes & Rivas, 2011), data were used from only the 33 immigrant mothers who were women of color and who were recruited in Boston (*n* = 17) and Chicago (*n* = 16).

Analytic Strategy

Rooted in both the theoretical perspective of the bioecological model and the ethnographic methods used to collect the data, we employed thematic analysis, proceeding in three general stages (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). First, open-coding was used by the first author, followed by preliminary axial coding (i.e., identifying relationships among the open codes), looking for “clusters of meaning” (Creswell, 2007) to create a stream-lined coding paradigm. In the second phase, this refined coding paradigm was employed to code documents in Atlas.ti with two undergraduate research assistants. The first author coded all of the documents and each research assistant was assigned to code half of the documents, ensuring that the codes were employed systematically for each of the 33 cases. During both coding phases, memos to reflect on important themes and questions emerging from the data were written.

The third phase of analysis built on these memos and employed Miles and Huberman’s (1994) approach to qualitative analysis using matrices. This approach permits a visualization of coded data by organizing information around various dimensions or themes. Notes on each case were arranged to examine similarities and differences across cases based on numerous characteristics, including: city of residence, country of origin, family structure, maternal employment, use of formal child care settings, and neighborhood ethnic composition. During this process the memos from the coding process were further developed. Ultimately, when patterns seemed to emerge from the data, the coded data from individual cases were revisited to explore greater nuance or disconfirm impressions.

Neighborhood Experiences of Immigrant Families and Child Care Use

Table 1 summarizes family characteristics for the 33 cases, with attention to the dynamic nature of families' lives across the years of data collection. Most mothers in Chicago were from Mexico, whereas Puerto Rico was the primary location of origin for mothers in Boston. Mothers in the Chicago sample were somewhat more likely to be first generation (i.e., moved to the United States at the age of 15 or older), rather than 1.5 generation immigrants (i.e., moved to the United States before age 15). In contrast to expected demographic patterns, mothers in both cities, but particularly Chicago, were somewhat more likely to have completed education through high school or beyond than to have less than a high school education. A majority of mothers spoke English at least well enough to get by in day-to-day tasks, although a substantial minority of mothers in Chicago spoke very limited English.

The majority (*n* = 26) of families in this sample used center-based care at some point during their participation in the ethnography. The high rate of center-based child care use is likely a function of the recruitment process, which involved child care centers, particularly in Chicago where five mothers were using the same center-based program. However, six mothers who were not using center-based child care at the outset of the ethnography transitioned their children into these types of formal arrangements during the study, and three families transitioned out of formal care during this period. Seven families did not use center-based child care programs at any time during the study. Thus, the variation in use of center-based care among families provides an excellent forum to understand how immigrant parents navigated the complex web of child care options, how they viewed different child care arrangements, and why they chose formal versus informal arrangements.

Mothers' discussions of child care suggested multiple ways in which neighborhoods contributed to child care decisions, and vice versa: child care played a role in determining where families lived. Themes emerging from the data explore the push and pull factors present in immigrant families' neighborhoods, including concerns about crime and safety, availability of neighborhood resources, and the meaning of living in co-ethnic compared with predominantly European American or more diverse communities. We explore each of these factors.

Resource Trade-offs

Twenty six mothers expressed serious concerns about crime and safety in their neighborhoods. These concerns were particularly acute in Chicago where gang activity was a primary worry for 13 mothers, yet for many families even dangerous neighborhoods provided valuable reasons to stay. Eleven mothers described their access to neighborhood resources, especially public transportation and schools, as key reasons they liked living in their neighborhoods despite worries about safety. For example, Rita, a mother of five from Mexico, very practically recognized the fact that all of her children could attend school within walking distance was a critical logistical advantage—despite her concerns about gang involvement in the house next door.

Similarly, Aileen and her four children stayed in their neighborhood because Aileen's sister lived in the same building and they had close friends down the block—this access to family and friends meant Aileen could rely on child care assistance if she would not be home from work on time to meet her children. Nonetheless, Aileen had many concerns about raising her children in the neighborhood. The ethnographer describes the area:

> In this side of the city, there is a big concentration of the Mexican working class. Most of the shop advertisements are in Spanish: Envie dinero a Mexico,

> verduleria, carniceria y tacos *[send money to Mexico, grocery store, butchery and Mexican food]*! Low-income immigrants live in this neighborhood. This becomes a fact when looking at the uncaring appearance of buildings, shops and streets. There are broken windows, pealing walls, graffiti, old construction structures, weeds, and garbage. The people don’t seem to pay attention to the bad conditions of their neighborhood. They just go on with their lives and continue their everyday activities.

Aileen complained about her neighborhood on multiple occasions, but did not discuss the physical disorder noted by the ethnographer, and instead focused on gangs as her primary concern: “Well here on [my street] (chuckles) I think it’s not too good… Yes, outside because there are lot of gang members, lots of uh...lots of bad things.” Among the “bad things” Aileen recounted at various times were frequent gunfire, screaming, and loud arguments that disrupt her children’s sleep.

For Aileen and many other mothers, local social networks supported mothers’ ability to use formal center-based child care by enabling families to seek occasional help with drop-off and pick-up schedules, wrap-around care before and after formal programming, and assistance with transportation. In fact, Aileen turned down an offer of subsidized housing because it meant she would no longer have family and friends in close proximity to assist with child care. The importance of both proximal child care programs and supportive social networks to facilitate center-based care use was evident for Jacinda: She moved away from her social network when she received a public housing unit in a different Boston neighborhood. Jacinda tried to enroll her three-year-old son, Carlos, in the Head Start program near her new home, only to find there was a waitlist. Initially undeterred, Jacinda inquired about child care vouchers, getting herself on another waitlist, and called local programs to inquire about sliding scale fees, only to be added to yet more waitlists.

Unable to afford the regular fees at any center where slots were available, Jacinda finally gave up, telling the ethnographer: “it’s not going to work out.” Not long after Jacinda gave up hope, Carlos was offered a spot in another Head Start program, approximately 30 minutes from their home by public transit, and Jacinda accepted immediately. Yet, this commute became untenable for Jacinda after only a few months: “because I was having a high-risk pregnancy so I had to take Carlos to the school walking and winter was coming and I was like no, so I pulled him out and I kept him at home.” Jacinda had no one in the area who could help her transport Carlos to the Head Start center outside of her neighborhood, and thus Carlos remained in the sole care of his mother until he could enter a public pre-kindergarten program, which provided transportation.

Pros and Cons of Co-Ethnic Neighborhoods

During most of the study, 12 of the families in the Chicago sample lived in neighborhoods that were predominantly Mexican and the remaining four families in Chicago lived in more ethnically diverse neighborhoods that included other Hispanic families. In contrast, in Boston six families lived in predominantly European American neighborhoods, whereas the remaining families lived in areas that were predominantly minority but generally diverse in terms of ethnic composition.

Availability of ethnic food in their neighborhoods was a resource of focus for nine mothers. In Chicago mothers were generally able to find desired products in small family-owned stores, but also increasingly in large chain grocery stores: Malissa, a mother of five said, “Thanks God, there are several Mexican grocery stores, and we can buy and cook Mexican food in the

Mexican way." In Boston, however, most mothers reported traveling outside of their neighborhoods, often to other nearby cities, to find preferred products. When Julia was asked what resources her Boston neighborhood needed, her first response was: "How about a Hispanic supermarket. I am forever running out of food and I have to go far to get it."

Six mothers reported explicitly choosing their neighborhoods, or preferring to stay in their neighborhoods, for the concentration of co-ethnic residents. Families tended to find others from their same villages in Mexico in their neighborhoods in Chicago, but it was living in a Spanish speaking community that was described as being of central importance, with all but one of these mothers having very limited English skills. A few mothers described these enclaves as a place for "newcomers" to find support from others of their same cultural backgrounds and indicated that it was possible feel "secure" in their neighborhoods because they knew the other families shared their values. Whereas four of these mothers moved directly into Mexican neighborhoods upon arrival in the United States, the other two mothers sought out Hispanic communities after residing in predominantly European American communities. For Rissa, a single mother from Puerto Rico who spoke almost no English, the institutional resources readily available in her historically European American Boston neighborhood could not compensate for the isolation she experienced there:

> Rissa: Sometimes I feel alone.
>
> Ethnographer: You feel you are away from everything?
>
> Rissa: No. Here I have everything close by; and the clinic is close. The problem is that there is no one Hispanic.

In addition to the desire to be near other Hispanic families, Alicia, a single mother from Mexico explained that when she lived in a European American neighborhood her neighbors were “the type that ignores you, the type of people that think they’re above you,” and “those two year [in that neighborhood] were awful!”

These preferences to avoid European Americans and engage with Hispanic families were echoed by five other mothers who lived in more ethnically diverse neighborhoods. Anna, a mother of four from Mexico, appreciated that other Mexican families in her neighborhood shared her values, but noted that “Americans” in the neighborhood tended to be younger and less concerned with family responsibility. Similarly, Anita, a Mexican mother of three, reported that the “Americans” in her neighborhood were unfriendly and therefore untrustworthy.

For some mothers, this discomfort with “Americans” led to an active avoidance of the neighborhood and any available resources. This trend was particularly pronounced in Boston among mothers seeking child care in predominantly European American neighborhoods. Although Marka eventually decided to enroll her only child, Tia, in a neighborhood preschool where “all the other kids… are white,” she refused to seek help from other parents at the school when her work schedule demanded she arrive before the preschool opened, creating a gap in child care. Marka explained her reasoning to the ethnographer: “I don’t trust white people. I have no connection to them.”

Similarly, Sonia, a young mother who moved from the Dominican Republic when she was five years old and grew up speaking fluent English in a predominantly European American Boston neighborhood viewed herself as quite different from her neighbors. When the ethnographer asked Sonia about her drive to further her education and work full-time, Sonia compared herself to others, especially in her neighborhood:

> "I think that I am different… it's hard to judge but many girls my age don't want to improve. Particularly the white girls who are hanging out… They have had to work less to get things we have to work for and then they don't take advantage of what is given to them."

When it came to exposing her daughter, Nola, to the neighborhood, Sonia was even less forgiving of her neighbors: "No, I don't let [Nola] be in any activities around here. No me gusta nada. Los niños tienen malas manas *[I don't like anything here. The children have bad manners]* around here." When Sonia was struggling to find center-based child care for Nola, the ethnographer asked about the school down the street and Sonia continued:

> "It's probably full of white kids and they will be mean to Nola… They are little racists. I don't want my daughter to have to deal with them. Then she will come home thinking that there is something wrong with her. The girl next door, she calls Nola 'stupid.' I tell her to stop doing that and she doesn't. It is just here. I can take her anywhere and not have those problems but here, they are racist."

Being an ethnic minority created a particular set of struggles for families in European American neighborhoods, but Sonia's perceived differences between her own and her neighbors' values were also reflected among immigrant families living in co-ethnic and in more diverse communities. Whereas mothers in Boston were most apt to describe their neighbors as lacking ambition, Mexican mothers in Chicago were more often deeply critical of the disengaged parenting behaviors they observed among their neighbors, including critiquing parents for working too much at the expense of spending time with their children.

In addition, the downsides of living in a co-ethnic community or associating only within ethnic groups in more mixed neighborhoods were noted by five mothers. Carrie, a Dominican mother of one, summarized:

> “So when I moved here to Carter Street, it’s full of my Latino community, where the majority are Puerto Rican, Dominican, and that’s like mixing opposites, like blending positive and negative solutions [mimics explosion sound]… There’s a lot of gossip, lots of noise, they want to know all that goes on in your life, they criticize you, they’re always checking on you to see what you’re doing or not doing, who you go out with, don’t go out with. It really isn’t a peace like I would wish for.”

Concerns about gossip were echoed by Mexican mothers as well, with one mother feeling that it was necessary to defend her decision to send her children to Head Start in her predominantly Mexican neighborhood; she thought that other mothers in the neighborhood believed she allowed her children to spend too much time away from home, even though the program was recommended to her by a neighborhood friend. Conversely, as Julia watched the Hispanic population increase in her historically European American neighborhood she emphasized that ethnicity alone could not create a cohesive community: “Be conscious that I don’t think of them [new Hispanic residents] as friendlier or anything because they are Latinos. Some hardly even speak Spanish.” As Julia’s comment highlights, social capital and cohesion in mothers’ neighborhoods was often bounded by language or membership in a specific ethnic group.

Discussion

Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model situates individuals within complex systems, recognizing the importance of proximal influences (i.e., microsystems) as well as broader social, cultural and historical contexts. For immigrant families, the intersections of these systems can be particularly meaningful as individuals navigate through differences between countries of origin and reception. This study examined two microsystems—neighborhoods and child care—as well as their mesosystem intersection to shed light on the experiences of immigrant mothers with young children.

The low-income immigrant mothers in this study expressed concerns about their neighborhoods, particularly around safety, and often struggled to find desirable child care for their young children. Yet, a majority of the families opted to use center-based care for reasons other than necessity. In other words, use of center-based child care was not simply a support for maternal employment. Neighborhood resources, as well neighborhood ethnic composition, played significant roles in determining the types of care families accessed. The longitudinal ethnographic approach used in this study allowed us to examine the complexities of push and pull factors related to neighborhoods and use of center-based child care at the level of the mesosystem.

A reluctance to use formal child care programs in neighborhoods where families were ethnic minorities suggests that social trust may help mothers to feel comfortable using neighborhood child care resources. Living in a co-ethnic community was desirable, and provided at least some feelings of shared values and cohesion. Nonetheless, having only a modest level of perceived similarities in values appears to have helped mothers feel a degree of ease engaging with formal neighborhood resources: Mothers did not always think that their co-ethnic communities supported their use of formal child care centers. Similarly, mothers did not always welcome the degree of community involvement in personal matters that existed in some co-ethnic neighborhoods.

Families in this study represent some of the most disadvantaged groups of immigrants in the United States—among Mexican and Puerto Rican families, the second generation does not, on average, rise above their parents' circumstances in terms of adult income or education (Farley & Alba, 2002; Feliciano & Lanuza, 2017). The neighborhood disadvantage experienced by many of the low-income families in this study may help explain an intergenerational transmission of poverty. Further, Hernandez and colleagues (2011) identify immigrants from Mexico and Puerto Rico as accounting for a large portion of the gap in child care enrollment between immigrants and non-immigrants in the United States. Yet, families in this study leveraged many assets by utilizing neighborhood social networks and seeking support from local institutions to balance family needs and access center-based child care in many instances. Mothers did not raise issues related to structural barriers to child care in the context of their immigration status, although such barriers were discussed related to other services (e.g., health care). Thus, in many ways the neighborhood barriers and resources families balanced in seeking child care may be consistent with experiences of low-income families more generally.

As an ethnographic study, however, it is not possible to generalize the findings beyond the 33 families who participated. Further, the findings are limited by the timing of data collection: The chronosystem has an integral role in shaping immigrant families' experiences. Since the time of data collection, the context of reception for immigrant families in the United States has become increasingly unwelcoming. In addition, the expansion of publicly funded preschool programs for three- and four-year-olds in recent years may remove some of the barriers to accessing child care that families in this study experienced.

Nonetheless, some of the limitations of these data are also strengths of the research approach: Longitudinal ethnographic data allow for an in-depth understanding of the experiences of these 33 families. Immigrants are disproportionately located in disadvantaged neighborhoods (Cutler et al., 2008; Suàrez-Orozco & Suàrez-Orozco, 2001). Thus, understanding how immigrant families perceive their neighborhoods and the meaning of these neighborhood circumstances for their child care selection strategies is a key contribution of this study to the broader literature.

Future Directions

The findings presented in this chapter suggest many opportunities for further research on immigrant families in the context of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model. Given the limitation of the timing of data collection and the specific geographic contexts, future research should investigate immigrants' neighborhood perceptions and child care use in the current sociopolitical climate, as well as in a broader range of locations. Additional qualitative work will help to continue elucidating the complex push and pull factors immigrant families face, whereas quantitative studies could provide more generalizable information on neighborhood experiences, particularly around discrimination, trust and social cohesion, and resource usage. Further, the shifting nature of immigrant destinations, with more and more families migrating to non-urban areas of the United States (Farrell, 2016), makes it imperative to understand how suburban and rural contexts contribute to immigrant families' experiences in their neighborhoods. Studies using a neighborhood-based sampling design, like this study, will be well-positioned to disentangle individualized perceptions and experiences from broader neighborhood trends affecting immigrant families.

Another area for future research is young immigrant children's acculturation in disadvantaged neighborhood contexts as well as the role of child care. Acculturation and the immigrant paradox is quite nuanced: on the one hand, findings suggest that a younger age of arrival in the United States makes children more vulnerable to depression, but also can support better educational outcomes than a later age of arrival (Perreira & Ornelas, 2011). On the other hand, Latino children in particular seem to pay a steep price for acculturation in the United States, with the real possibility of downward assimilation among children whose families lack human capital (Suárez-Orozco, 2001). These processes are not sufficiently understood at the individual-level, and the microsystems studied in this chapter may have a key role to play. For instance, the neighborhoods in Chicago where immigrant mothers lived were largely Mexican neighborhoods, providing cultural support in many ways for new families. However, these same neighborhoods were plagued by gang violence, with many mothers hoping to find alternate living arrangements for their whole families, or at least their adolescents, before children were old enough to attend local high schools and become enmeshed in the gang culture. Similarly, participation in center-based child care typically provides cognitive advantages for young children; but, to the extent participation in neighborhood institutions restricts social capital and opportunities to utilize resources outside of one's neighborhood, center-based child care may not adequately compensate for the range of disadvantages children face. In other words, access to center-based child care alone cannot be assumed to provide immigrant children with the academic advantages available to non-immigrant children in more advantaged communities.

Finally, this study suggests that access to public housing and housing subsidies may be another microsystem worthy of research in understanding immigrant families' trajectories in the United States. For instance, both Aileen and Jacinda were offered some sort of housing assistance. Jacinda accepted this assistance, but in doing so removed herself from a supportive local network of friends and kin. Aileen turned down her housing assistance, despite her real need for it and her desire to move to a safer street—she was too afraid of leaving her network of child care supports. Moreover, immigrants who lived in predominantly European American neighborhoods in Boston did so primarily because they were offered public housing units in those neighborhoods. Access to public and subsidized housing programs at the federal level for non-citizens fall under somewhat less restrictive control than many other federal social safety net programs (Siskin & McCarty, 2012), thus, understanding the circumstances and service utilization of immigrant families who access housing assistance would be informative both about their potential barriers to child care use and neighborhood conditions.

Conclusion

Families are embedded in myriad microsystems and examining the mesosystem linkages between these microsystems is essential for understanding how families navigate across and within systems. For immigrant families, this navigation also means learning about differences in systems between two, or more, countries. The findings presented in this chapter suggest that neighborhoods and child care are two microsystems that are closely linked for low-income immigrant families. Notably, immigrant mothers experience push and pull factors within their neighborhoods, with access to resources for their children being one reason families remain living in areas that may otherwise not be their communities of choice. By examining the complexities of immigrant mothers' neighborhood perceptions and decisions around child care for young children, this chapter highlights themes around the role of physical safety, race and ethnicity, and social cohesion.

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Table 1

Ethnographic Sample Description

	Boston *N* = 17	Chicago *N* = 16	Full Sample *N* = 33
Mother country of origin			
Dominican Republic	4	0	4
El Salvador	1	0	1
Honduras	1	0	1
Jamaica	1	0	1
Mexico	0	15	15
Puerto Rico	9	1	10
Trinidad	1	0	1
Mother age as of 2000			
19-24	5	1	6
25-30	5	3	8
31-36	2	7	9
> 36	4	5	9
Unknown	1	0	1
Age mother moved to United States			
< 15	7	3	10
≥ 15	7	11	18
Circular migration during childhood	2	2	4
Unknown	1	0	1

	Boston *N* = 17	Chicago *N* = 16	Full Sample *N* = 33
Significant other			
Stable partner	5	11	16
Unstable partner	6	2	8
Stable single	6	3	9
Number of children			
1	3	2	5
2	5	0	5
3	4	6	10
≥ 4	5	8	13
Mother education			
< High School	8	5	13
≥ High School	9	9	18
Unknown	0	2	2
Mother employment outside the home			
Stable full-time	5	6	11
Unstable	8	5	13
None	4	5	9
Mother English ability			
Very limited	4	6	10
Adequate - Excellent	11	8	19
Unknown	2	2	4