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Conversations with the Experts

Immigration and Work-Family

Joseph Grzywacz

Bio: Joseph G. Grzywacz, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Family and Community Medicine, is an interdisciplinary social scientist whose research focuses on the health-related implications of work, family, and the linkages between work and family. His research is supported by public and private sponsors including the National Institutes of Health and the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, and it has been published in journals such as the *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *Social Science and Medicine*, *Journal of Immigrant Health, Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, *Behavioral Medicine*, *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, and *American Journal of Health Promotion*. His papers have been recognized as among the "best of the best" of work-family research in two of the past five years.

An Interview with Joseph Grzywacz

By Judi Casey and Karen Corday

Grzywacz: Before we start the interview, I want to provide readers with a general background on our research. Most of our research is on a very specific group of immigrants. The vast majority of study participants are from rural Mexico, which makes our research different from existing research on immigrants. I don't mean to suggest that there is a large body of work and family research on immigrants, but there is some; most of which has focused on immigrants from urban places, immigrants who have been living in the United States for an extended period of time, or immigrants who have settled in geographic places like California or Arizona that have had intact Latino populations before there was an Anglo population. This is important to remember, because it really shapes the findings from our research. Our study participants are in North Carolina, a state with little history of Latino immigration, but yet is one of the fastest growing settlement areas for new immigrants. Most of the participants in our studies have been in the United States for a short period of time—ten years, for us, is a long time. The vast majority of our participants come from rural areas and come directly from Mexico. They haven't been living in the United States for an extended period of time and as a result have low levels of English speaking ability. They also tend to have low levels of formal education. This creates a very distinct type of work experience from which you must interpret all of the comments I make about work and family among immigrants.

Casey: Thank you for that backdrop. When our readers hear the words "Mexican American," they may be thinking of a very different population than the one you are talking about.

Grzywacz: That's right. In fact, most of the people in our research are not Mexican Americans. They are immigrants from Mexico, and their primary goal (typically) is to return to Mexico some day. Further, as with any group, there's substantial within-group variability, but the fact they are mostly from rural backgrounds carries with it cultural connotations. Overall, they are not nearly as acculturated as people raised in urban areas or the border towns. Ideas about women's work and the division of household labor are very different in rural Mexico than they are in urban Mexico. Also, we purposely do not ask about immigration status, but many of the people with whom we do research are believed to be undocumented. That means many of them work at the "hidden

jobs" not usually covered in work-family research.

Casey: What are some of the work-family issues experienced by this group?

Grzywacz: Immigration at its essence is a work-family issue. Most of the people in our research come to the United States primarily to earn a living. Many immigrants face the tough decision of whether or not they're going to leave their families in Mexico. Paradoxically, in coming to the U.S. immigrants have the potential to help their family but, in the process of leaving, families left in Mexico are both physically and financially vulnerable. When immigrants arrive, they may find an economic situation that may or may not allow them to send money back home. Although the basic hardships confronted by immigrant Latinos may accentuate the work-family experiences that accompany immigration, I do not think the work-family experiences are entirely unique to immigrants from Mexico or Central America. For many people, whether they're immigrating from one country to another or from one state to another, immigration is a work-family issue because it is frequently motivated by work and it has clear implications for families.

Secondly, at least in our context, most immigrants do not have a working model for what a dual earner household looks like and how it operates. Many immigrants come from an environment where women are responsible for running the home and caring for children while men are responsible for earning a living for the family. When immigrants arrive in the United States, they find that this strict division of labor does not work: good paying jobs are hard to find and the cost of living is substantially greater here than in Mexico. Furthermore, the support structures frequently in place in Mexico, such as extended kinship networks for helping with childcare, have been broken down by the process of immigration. So, the combination of the unfamiliar model of a dual earner household and the lack of resources create some real difficulties.

Casey: Do the majority of these immigrants even experience dual earner family situations? It sounds as if many workers come to the U.S. by themselves, rather than as part of a family.

Grzywacz: It's a combination. In our research with farmworkers, we find that many immigrants arrive unaccompanied. For these workers, separation from family and community is a significant issue. It's not uncommon for people to first arrive unaccompanied and then have spouses and children immigrate later. At that point, the issue of dual earner households becomes more relevant. So, it is not really an either–or situation: we see both situations in our data and each situation has its own implications for immigrants. Being unaccompanied and somewhat isolated can be very challenging. However, it can also be challenging to be accompanied because there are more people to support which creates financial strain that is made worse by difficulties finding "good jobs" and the higher cost of living in the U.S.

Casey: How does gender affect work-family issues for this group?

Grzywacz: There are a few different things that play out here. First, as I mentioned before, the immigrants with whom we work do not have a solid model for navigating the dual-earner household. This creates difficulties because, in a way, it begins to break down culturally-based roles assigned to women and men. Some men have told us they feel less valuable as human beings and husbands because they're not able to adequately provide for their spouses and families. On the other hand there is also the potential empowerment for women because, as the opportunities in the work domain open, they are less reliant on men as financial providers. There are clear ideas of "maleness" and "womanhood" and when immigrants experience the dual-earner household model, both men and women find themselves doing things they've never done before. Women find themselves with "their own money" and opportunities to socialize with other men on the job. Men find themselves being responsible for basic household tasks and providing care for their children. These are situations for which immigrants can be unprepared and lack clear cultural models for responding. This, of course, is all bound up in the sociological idea of gender; situations require individuals to behave in ways that contradict how they've been socialized. This creates tension in relationships, and we have seen some evidence that women bear the brunt of this challenge more than men. Women often work outside of the home but are still expected (by both other women and men) to maintain the household and care for their children. Gender is bound up in the work-family experience. Part of it is a function of what women and men are accustomed to doing and what they're prepared to do. The new experiences that they have can fly in the face of what they think men and women should be doing.

Casey: Do you think that cultural issues play a role?

Grzywacz: I think gender illustrates the role of culture very well, particularly if you define culture as "shared beliefs." Another important aspect of cultural influence is the lack of distinction between work and family. As I

already pointed out, the immigrants in our studies come to the United States to earn financial security for their families. The idea that work is opposed to family is not apparent in this population because work is essential to the survival of the family. The idea of going to work, working a long day, and coming home exhausted—even if it interferes with activities such as playing with one's children—is viewed as something that's acceptable and potentially even good for the family. When compared with the white middle class notion that long work hours are a basic interference to healthy family life, it is clear that those cultural views underlie work-family issues.

Casey: So work is considered the primary relationship, and whatever it takes to be successful at work is tolerated and anticipated, because work is the reason they came to the United States?

Grzywacz: I would not call it the primary relationship, but it is seen as a necessary means to an end. The primary goal is family well-being and finances play an important role in the household production of well-being. From this point of view, it is clear that paid work is a legitimate and primary means to the valued end of securing family well-being. Immigrants in our research are not primarily concerned with getting a job so that they can accumulate personal wealth; rather they are concerned with finding and keeping "good jobs" so that they can create a better life for their families. Recognizing that immigrants have a hard time finding well-paying jobs, these workers need to work as hard as they can and as much as they can to assure the financial well-being of their families. Work isn't prioritized over family, it's seen as an essential means to meeting family-related ends.

Casey: How does that impact families?

Grzywacz: I don't think there's enough data at this time to speak about that issue in the way it's usually discussed in work-family research. In general, we think that if people are so focused on work, their family relationships are going to suffer. However, that's interpreted through the lens of white, middle-class America – a context wherein individuals are not generally concerned with basic necessities such as food and housing. When basic necessities are not met, the entire question of how work affects families is fundamentally shifted. This is not to say that things like marital relationships and positive parenting are unimportant in the face of economic hardship; clearly they are. Rather the basic point is that we cannot superimpose a white middle-class model of work and family life, as well as value judgments inherent in that model, on different groups of people like immigrant Latinos. Recognizing that Latinos are the fastest growing segment of the labor force, research is needed to clearly document the effect of work and immigrants' work practices on their families.

Casey: How do these issues surface at the workplace?

Grzywacz: I'm not aware of any researcher that has asked this question, so I have to go by anecdote alone. The issues are manifest at work in ways such as going to work even though workers are not feeling well because they are afraid of losing their jobs or don't have enough money to afford to take a day off. According to our research, an immigrant must be virtually "on death's door" before he or she will call in sick to work. Some people call that presenteeism, but that's not exactly right in this context. Working while ill has substantial potential for injury in the workplace due to distraction or relatively low acuity, particularly in light of the fact that immigrants are frequently employed in jobs with elevated risk for injury. By extension, if a worker is having a problem at home, such as a fight with a spouse, they will probably go to work, although they may be distracted. So, there may be some implications, but they are not parallel to the kinds of implications we think of in work-family research in general.

Casey: How could academics and researchers move forward with our knowledge of work-family issues for immigrants?

Grzywacz: It's important to keep in mind that patterns of immigration have changed substantially over the last twenty years. Prior to that time, immigrants were settling in different places than they are now. In 1985, research with immigrants was conducted in California, Texas, Arizona, and Florida, places that have a long history of having a Latino population. By contrast, today's fastest growing states in terms of immigrant population are places such as North Carolina, Georgia, and Iowa—the Midwest and relatively rural Southeast. For all intents and purposes, these places have had a mostly white population for a very long time. There are no long-established Latino communities to help new arrivals. Latino immigrants arriving to any community in San Diego will find Spanish materials everywhere, people who are accustomed and prepared to interact in Spanish (or other indigenous language), and support systems for finding work and housing. San Diego has a deep and well-established Latino community. By contrast, the Latino community in places like Wilkesboro, North Carolina or Waterloo, Iowa started developing in the 1990s as a function of the growth of the city's poultry processing industry. When an immigrant arrives in these new settlement areas, they are not immediately directed towards resources to help them with social services, health care needs, their children's

schools, and so forth. These conditions create a different type of experience for immigrants. Without basic research in both existing and new immigrant settlement communities, how can work-life researchers and practitioners help immigrant families navigate the social systems in the United States?

Another important issue that I alluded to earlier is that there is a real lack of work and family research with any immigrant population. Because of this, it's difficult to speak about possible interventions and policies; they are driven by guesses and anecdotes rather than clear, documented evidence. There's a dramatic need to create research tools and concerted research effort in order to inform policy.

Casey: What about the role of employers?

Grzywacz: Speaking primarily from anecdotes, issues that have surfaced in the context of employed immigrants include support systems in the community. Employees arriving in, for example, North Carolina, take a long time to get connected with services. Employers who are hiring these workers can consider whether or not they can offer services to recent immigrants that help them better connect with social and human services and English as a Second Language classes. This will help their employees to navigate the social system of the United States.

There's also the issue of the exploitation of immigrant workers. There's been plenty of high profile cases in the press highlighting companies that hire immigrants to do the jobs that Americans don't want to do. This has obvious work-family implications— it's an issue of ethics and how employers recruit employees for their non-professional, frequently labor-intensive jobs.

Another consideration for employers is the fact that in our experience, immigrants are struggling just to get by. There's good evidence of high levels of food insecurity in the immigrant population as well as poor housing. This speaks to issues of wages and benefits, which is also something for state public policy makers to consider.

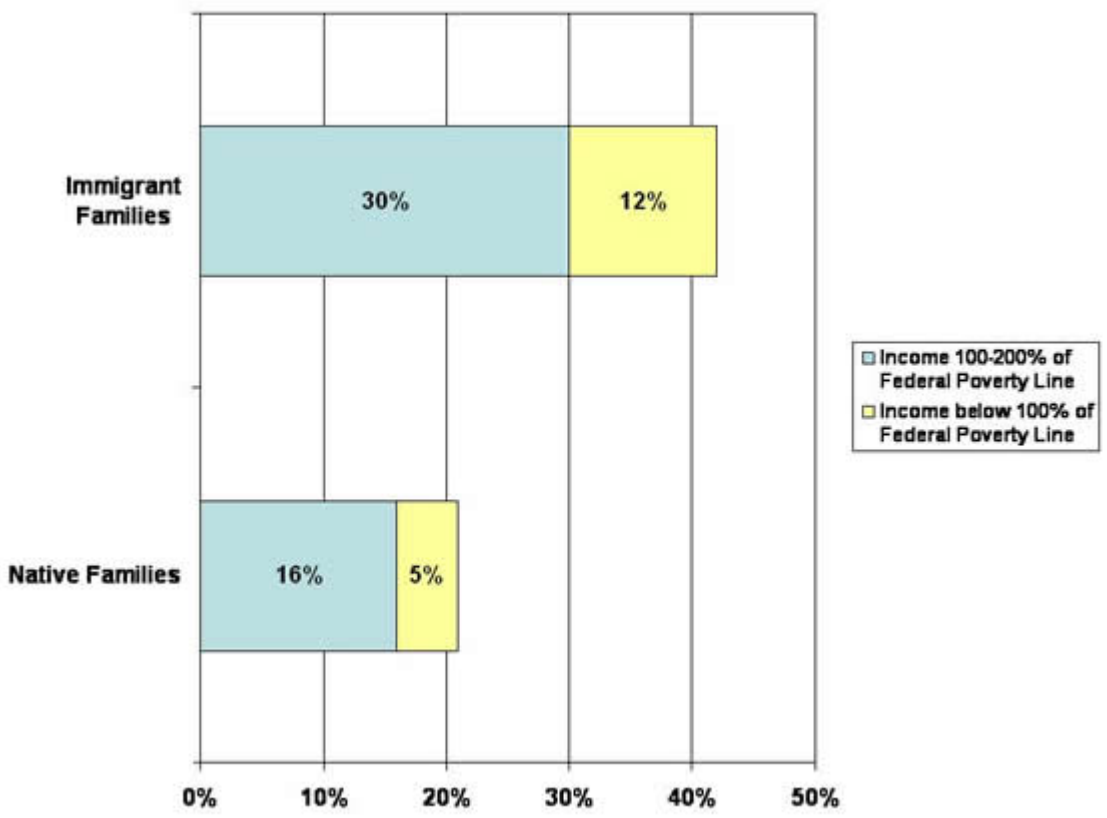
Casey: How else could state public policy makers intervene?

Grzywacz: When I think of state policy, it occurs to me that there is a need for better regulation of the work arrangements in which immigrants are disproportionately found. Immigrants often work in the most dangerous occupations. If they are going to work no matter what, the potential for injury and illness is compounded. Greater surveillance of risky occupations is something that could be directed and overseen by policy makers. A living wage is another issue that can be mandated at the state policy level and at the employer level—I'd be happy with both.

Finally, states can step in with educational materials and programs that help immigrants successfully execute the dual worker arrangement. Perhaps this could be a budget line item as part of the Cooperative Extension Program. Few materials available are currently culturally appropriate for immigrants.

It's important to remember that Latinos are the fastest growing segment of the American labor force. This is a high priority area for future research. How can we inform policies and interventions at any level without any research on this population?

Low-Income and Poverty Rates for Immigrant and Native Working Families



Source: Capps, R., Fix, M., Henderson, E., & Reardon-Anderson, J. (2005, June). A profile of low-income working immigrant families. *New Fedaralism: National Survey of America's Families, B*(B067), 1-8. Retrieved July 26, 2007, from the Urban Institute web site: http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/311206_B-67.pdf.

Additional Resources Related to Immigration and Work-Family

AFL/CIO: Immigrant Workers: The "voluntary federation of 55 national and international labor unions" has compiled their policies, recommendations, online publications, and statistics on immigrant workers in one section on their web site.

- To access the section, click here: http://www.aflcio.org/issues/civilrights/immigration/

***America's Newest Working Families: Cost, Crowding and Conditions for Immigrants*:** This 44 page report from the Center for Housing Policy is the "first-ever, national look at immigrant working families, comparing their housing situation to those of native-born Americans. Higher rates of critical needs and crowding are the story, told in a clear, bold, graphical style."

- To access the report in PDF format, click here: http://www.nhc.org/pdf/pub_nc_07_03.pdf

***The Future of Children*: Children of Immigrant Families:** This special issue of *The Future of Children* includes eight articles and a bibliography.

- To access the entire issue, click here: http://www.futureofchildren.org/pubs-info2825/pubs-info_show.htm?doc_id=240166

National Immigrant Law Center: "Our mission is to protect and promote the rights and opportunities of low-income immigrants and their family members. NILC staff specialize in immigration law and the employment

and public benefits rights of immigrants. We conduct policy analysis and impact litigation and provide publications, technical advice, and trainings to a broad constituency of legal aid agencies, community groups, and pro bono attorneys."

- To access the website, click here: http://www.nilc.org/index.htm

Urban Institute: Immigrants: The "nonpartisan economic and social policy research organization…has studied U.S. immigrants—their impacts, settlement patterns, and incorporation into the labor market, as well as the integration of immigrant families and children." The Immigrants section of their web site includes 186 full-text publications on immigrants, statistics, and policy briefs. One particularly useful publication: *A Profile of Low-Income Working Immigrant Families*: http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/311206_B-67.pdf

- To access the section, click here: http://www.urban.org/immigrants/index.cfm

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