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Maternal Perceptions of Agency in Intergenerational Transmission of Spanish: The case of Latinos in the U.S. Midwest

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Abstract

This article examines the ways in which a group of first-generation Latino immigrants to the U.S. Midwest conceptualized their role in their children's bilingual development. Respondents were asked to identify the individuals or institutions on which their children's language and academic development depended, as well as household practices perceived as conducive to Spanish maintenance, and perceived obstacles to their children's use of Spanish in the domains of home, school, and community. Discussion centers on maternal perceptions of agency because of the centrality of the mother in intergenerational minority language transmission. It is argued here that immigrant mothers' perceptions of agency are impacted by several factors. Among them: the experience of migration, the power imbalance created when their children are more fluent than the parents are in the majority language and culture, and finally, by the negotiation of ideological tensions between members of intra-community Latino networks of solidarity and the community at large.

Keywords: Spanish, intergenerational transmission, bilingualism, speaker perceptions, Midwest, gender

Introduction

This paper examines the ways in which certain members of a group of first-generation Latino immigrants to the United States understand their role in their children's bilingual development. The 3 questions to be addressed here are, What perceptions did respondents hold about their own role in their children's development of Spanish and English? What type of household practices did respondents perceive as conducive to maintenance of the family language? And

finally, What obstacles, if any, did respondents perceive regarding their children's use of Spanish at home and in their community? Speaker perceptions, or speaker beliefs, are part of a larger constellation of subjective processes related to language use that include linguistic ideologies, worldviews, social stereotypes, language attitudes, and social categorization (Kristiansen, Garrett, & Coupland, 2005). These processes are at the core of the ideological frameworks that, as McGroarty (2008) points out, determine choice, evaluation, and use of language for all speakers and in all language communities. In recent scholarship these subjective representations of language and its users have been conceptualized as central to language change. Kristiansen et al. (2005), for example, argue that these representations are the driving force behind variation and change, because they entail valorization processes inherently present in the construction of boundaries between social groups.

The Role of Language Ideologies in Minority Language Use and Transmission

The concepts of *language ideology* and *language attitude* (the former, borrowed from the field of linguistic anthropology and the latter, from social psychology) are useful when attempting to elucidate the complex interplay between larger social conditions and individual choices related to minority language use and transmission. Language ideologies, which have been described as "belief systems that determine language attitudes, judgments, and ultimately, behavior" (Spolsky, as cited in McGroarty, 2008, p. 98), are the context in which attitudes are shaped. The difficulty with studying them, however, is that language ideologies can be explicit or "remain tacit in whole or in part, and must be inferred through examination of various combinations of the actual practices and language-related decisions of speakers and institutions" (McGroarty, 2008, p. 99). Further, language ideologies are not monolithic, and not necessarily shared by all members of the same social group or the same community (Gal, 1998). In fact, as Gal (1998) argues, the power of dominant language ideologies derives precisely from their ability "to gain the assent of those whose social identities, characteristics and practices they do *not* valorize or even recognize" (p. 321). However, examination of these ideological representations is important because, as has been argued before, ideologies of language "enact ties of language to identity, to aesthetics, to morality, and to epistemology" (Woolard, 1998, p. 3), entail relations of power (Philips, 1998), and not only reflect social reality but help to construct it, inasmuch as they set the conditions for social interaction (Gal, 1998; González, 2005). Examining the influence of community environment and household dynamics on early bilingual development, several authors have highlighted the need to include parental beliefs and ideologies in this analysis (De Houwer, 1999; Lanza, 2007; Li, 2006). "An important factor that has an impact on the parents' language choice and indeed on the child's bilingual acquisition concerns language ideology," writes Lanza (2007, p. 49), who also notes that "the attitudes of the environment and the parents will play a role in language choice patterns" (p. 49). Parents, she adds, "express their ideology covertly in their language choice in interaction, and hence socialize their children to this ideology" (p. 61). One of the factors that complicate this analysis is the fact that parents (and, we might add, other adults involved in childrearing) may share the same ideologies and attitudes overtly but covertly make different linguistic choices. Or they may hold different linguistic ideologies altogether, which could lead to conflict in household language planning (Lanza, 2007).

Language Attitudes and Minority Language Use and Transmission

Most research on bilingual families has been conducted from 1 of 3 approaches: surveys of household practices, measurement of parental attitudes, or interactional analyses of parent-child conversations (Lanza, 2007). The present discussion is centered within the second of these approaches. Attitudes have been described as “a learned disposition to think, feel and behave toward a person (or object) in a particular way” (Allport, as cited Garrett, 2010, p. 19), and are generally considered to be a product of social learning (Ager, 2001; Garrett, 2010) that can change as a result of both individual needs and social situations (Baker, 1992). Like language ideologies, individual attitudes about language are mostly latent and must be inferred from external behavior. Because of this, the relationship between attitudes and behavior is problematic (Baker, 2006; Garrett, 2010).

In social psychological literature it is generally assumed that attitudes have 3 components: cognitive, affective, and conative (Ager, 2001; Garrett, 2010). Language beliefs, or *language perceptions*, are identified by several authors as the cognitive component of language attitudes. Although fundamentally cognitive in nature, language beliefs may also evoke strong emotional reactions (Garrett, Coupland, & Williams, 2003). Allard and Landry (1992) identify 4 types of language beliefs: (a) *general beliefs*, perceptions of the general state of a language and its users; (b) *normative beliefs*, perceptions of how things should be; (c) *self-beliefs*, speaker perceptions about self-efficacy and group belonging; and (d) *goal beliefs*, perceptions about desired or intended action. Speaker perceptions about their role in their children’s bilingual development involve both self- and goal beliefs. Perceptions of household practices involve general beliefs, and perceptions about obstacles to children’s language use involve both general and normative beliefs.

Baker (2006) highlights the need to include language attitudes in explanatory models of minority language maintenance and loss:

The absence of strong integrative or instrumental attitudes may be linked to the absence of minority-language reproduction in the home. Negative attitudes to a minority language may be a prime cause of parents’ not passing on the heritage language to a child. (p. 215)

In the case of Spanish in the United States, however, previous research (Schechter & Bayley, 2002; Velázquez, 2009; Worthy & Rodríguez-Galindo, 2006) has shown that positive parental attitudes toward Spanish and even parental perceptions of strong ethnolinguistic vitality do not necessarily lead to successful intergenerational transmission. This suggests, then, that it is necessary to go a step further and investigate how speakers conceptualize their own role in the transmission process.

Maternal Perceptions of Agency

A definition of the concept of *agency* is the source of an ongoing discussion at the core of social sciences. Fuchs (2007) identifies 4 major strands of this discussion: *rational choice theory*, *ethnomethodology*, *constructivist agency*, and *symbolic interactionism*. It is this last understanding of agency that will inform the present discussion: Agency is complex and multidimensional and emerges through a process of social formation and re-formation; actors see themselves through the perceptions of others. It will be argued then, that socialization, both of the children and the

parents in these families, takes place through interaction (Pease-Alvarez, 2002; Schieffelin, 1990) and involves active, creative social agents involved in dynamic identity formation processes (Kristiansen et al., 2005; Lanza, 2007). What has been identified here as a *perception of agency* is also what De Houwer (1999) calls an *impact belief*: “The parental belief that parents can exercise some sort of control over their children’s linguistic functioning” (p. 83). As this author points out, the best chances for active bilingualism are commonly present in families in which parents have a positive impact belief concerning their own role in the child’s acquisition process. The link between at-home socialization and school readiness in Latino children was explored by Durand (2010), who studied a group of 56 kindergarteners and their mothers and found that the mother’s at-home practices regarding social behavior was related to the child’s literacy skills and classroom engagement. Durand argues that these practices related to significance of relationships, proper behavior, and conduct with others are inextricably bound to Latino parents’ beliefs about their children’s education.

Intergenerational Language Transmission as Gendered Work

This discussion centers on the way in which the mother in these families understood her role in her children’s development of Spanish and English. This understanding has been called here a *perception of agency*. Previous studies have pointed to the centrality of the mother in intergenerational minority language transmission (Okita, 2002; Potowski & Matts, 2008; Touminen, 1999; Velázquez, 2009).¹ Other authors, such as Moll (2005), highlight the role of women in the formation of household and community networks and funds of knowledge.

Okita (2002) stresses the gendered nature of what she calls *invisible work*: linguistic and cultural transmission in minority-language households. Lanza (2007) reminds the reader that in these households, most of the social repercussions for failure to transmit the family language fall on the mother. Focusing on maternal perceptions of agency is relevant because in immigrant households, parents—and in particular mothers—must negotiate transnational and local pressures either to foster bilingualism in their family or to encourage substrative assimilation to English.

An additional and equally important reason why this study focuses on maternal perceptions is role the mother plays in household language planning. If we are to understand the family as a sociolinguistic space and a vital social unit for acquiring language (Lanza, 2007), it follows then that some amount of language planning is taking place within it.

Because they bore the primary responsibility for daily childrearing tasks, and because they regulated much of their children’s schedules, activities, and opportunities for interaction outside the home, the mothers in these families played a fundamental role in this decision making process. Importantly, language planning can be explicit or implicit (Wiley, 1995), and may or may not have clear, articulated goals (Ricento, 2006). Because of this, a richer analysis of household language dynamics in immigrant households must also take into account children’s attitudes toward use of the family language (Velázquez, 2014), as well as children’s language planning activities. Indeed,

1. In his study of intergenerational transmission of Spanish within a group of 4 Vancouver families, Guardado (2006) discusses the situation of a family of Salvadoran origin in which the father attempts to transmit the family language to his son, while the mother, who lives in the same household, does not. Although the author describes this situation as an attempt to transmit the *Father tongue* (p. 58), his own observations support previous findings regarding the mother’s role in minority-language transmission, because in this household intergenerational transmission of Spanish was unsuccessful.

children in all households manipulate or plan the language behavior of their parents (Ager, 2001). In immigrant households these planning activities can be both overt and covert and may include, for example, exchanges in which the child refuses to use the home language and the adult switches to English for expediency reasons or instances when children serve as linguistic and cultural brokers for their parents (Faulstich Orellana, 2003; Tse, 1995). In fact, authors such as Touminen (1999) have argued that in immigrant households it is the children who decide what the home language will be. "Children in multilingual families are socializing their parents instead of being socialized by them," she writes; moreover, "they are teaching their parents 'to speak the same language' as the rest of America" (p. 73). The result, adds Touminen, is a potential power imbalance that can occur between parents and children. It will be argued here that this power imbalance can have consequences not only for linguistic transmission but also for parental authority and for children's socialization.

Method

The results presented in this paper are part of a larger study on household language practices and attitudes toward Spanish in a group of first-generation Latino families in Nebraska. The overarching goals were to gain a better understanding of maintenance and loss from the perspective of the family and to analyze the role of attitudes and self-perceptions on household language dynamics. Twenty-five families were recruited for this study in the city of Lincoln. To participate, families had to live in 2-parent households² with at least 1 child under the age of 18 living at home and 2 parents who were native speakers of Spanish. In the end, 6 families were excluded from analysis either because they relocated midstudy, or because they failed to meet 1 or more participation requirements.

Two sociolinguistic interviews were conducted with the mother and 1 child in each household. The first interview took place at the beginning of the study, and the second, 5 months later. Interviews were conducted in Spanish by female bilingual interviewers who were native speakers of Spanish and lived in the same community as the interviewees. With the child's assent, the parents in each family chose which of their children would be interviewed for this project. Children and adolescents were interviewed using an instrument designed to gather data on their level of aural and oral competence in Spanish, their perceptions about the viability of Spanish in their everyday life, and their attitudes toward Spanish, English, and bilingualism (Velázquez, in press). Mothers were interviewed using an instrument designed to collect data on perceived language competence, perceived role in their children's linguistic development, attitudes about Spanish transmission, maternal understandings of bilingualism, reported patterns of household language use, and family strategies related to maintenance. The corpus for the present analysis comes from 33 hours of recorded interviews.

In order to investigate respondents' self-perception about their role in their children's language development, which is the focus of this article, respondents were asked to identify the individuals

2. For ease of comparison, participation was limited to 2-parent households in which both parents were native speakers of Spanish. Although language dynamics in 1-parent households and households in which only 1 parent speaks Spanish are in and of themselves quite interesting, they constitute a different language environment in which children's everyday exposure to Spanish is reduced.

or institutions upon whom their children's development of Spanish and English depended.³ For each of these questions, participants were asked to select from the following options: *It depends* (1) *completely on me*; (2) *on my husband and me*; (3) *on my children and me*; (4) *on the whole family*; (5) *on the school*⁴; or (6) *on the family and the community* or (7) *I don't know/other*. It was expected that individuals with a greater sense of agency would identify themselves as being primarily responsible for this development. Although the main focus of this study was Spanish transmission, 1 item concerning acquisition of English was included because maintenance of the home language and acquisition of the majority language were concurrent processes in these households. Additionally, preliminary research in the same community suggests that these processes are not perceived as isolated by Latino parents. A third item, related to academic development, was included as a point of comparison.

Participants were also asked to identify activities or practices that they perceived as being conducive to Spanish maintenance in their household. To do this, they were asked to respond to the following questions: *What are 3 things that you normally do that help your children maintain Spanish?* *What are 3 things that your husband normally does that help your children maintain Spanish?* and, *What are 3 things that happen every week in your home or in your community that require your children to use Spanish?* Finally, as a way to investigate perceived obstacles to maintenance of Spanish in their family, respondents were asked to name the most difficult thing about their children speaking Spanish in 3 different domains: home, school, and community. The domains of school and community were included to explore respondents' perception of the viability of Spanish in these 2 public spaces.

The Community and the Families

The city of Lincoln, Nebraska, is a community located in the U.S. Midwest, with low ethnolinguistic vitality for Spanish and a recent history of Latino settlement. In 2009, only 5% of the city's total population of 247,882 was Latino. In the same year, some 9,955 people over the age of 5 spoke Spanish at home (U.S. Census Bureau). The median household size for the 19 families in this study was 5. In 26% of these households there were more adults than children. These adults were all native speakers of Spanish and included children older than 18 who were living at home, grandparents, or other members of the extended family. Two households included at least 1 child under 18 who was related to but not the son or daughter of the respondent. At least 2 families had children under 18 living in Mexico.

In 9 of these 19 families, the father had lived in the United States between 1 and 10 years longer than the mother. In 2 families the mother had lived in the United States between 1 and 3 years longer than the father. These included cases in which 1 partner returned to Mexico to marry after residing in the United States, and cases in which the mother and children had been separated from

3. This item was presented using the construction "*¿De quién depende que . . . ?*" (literally, *On whom does it depend that . . . ?*) and not, "*¿Quién es responsable de . . . ?*" (literally, *Who is responsible for . . . ?*) because in Mexican Spanish (and perhaps in other dialects as well) the construction "*¿De quién depende que . . . ?*" entails not only individual responsibility but a volition and capacity to act, thereby inferring a sense of agency.

4. Because children and parents interacted with several teachers, paraprofessionals, and other members of the staff throughout the school year, this item was presented using the collective reference "school" instead of the individual "teacher."

the father for several years. About 37% of all fathers and 26% of all mothers in this study had lived in another U.S. location before moving to Nebraska. The father with the longest history of residence had lived for 26 years in this country, while the mother with the longest history of residence had lived for 16 years in the United States. The shortest period of residence for either parent was 1 year. Eighty-nine percent of the parents in this study were born in Mexico. In 1 family the father was from Mexico and the mother, from Guatemala. One family was originally from Peru but immigrated to the United States after living in Argentina.

The parents

All parents in this study were native speakers of Spanish and were born outside of the United States. None were native speakers of English. The median age for the father was 37; for the mother, 35. This was higher than the median age for Latinos in the state, which was 12 years for native and 34 years for foreign-born Latino Nebraskans (Pew Hispanic Center, 2011). Sixty-eight percent of the fathers worked in the construction or industrial sectors; 16% worked in the service sector, 11% were reported by their spouses to be employed but unspecified, and 1 was unemployed. Seventy-nine percent of mothers were homemakers, and 21% worked in the service sector.

The median years of schooling in Spanish for either parent was 9 years. According to their spouse's report, most fathers in these families had learned English at work: 63% had never received formal instruction in English and 26% had studied English between 2 and 5 years. One father had attended high school in the United States, and 1 had studied English for less than 1 year. By contrast, the mothers reported being less proficient in English than their spouses, but more of them had received some form of instruction in the language. Forty-two percent of the mothers had studied English between 1 year and 3 years, and another 26% had studied it for less than a year. Thirty-two percent had not studied English. The most common form of English instruction for the mothers was the free courses offered by community organizations, churches, and their children's schools.

The children

There were 52 children between the ages of 11 months and 20 years in these 19 households. Three were older than 18 and still living at home but were not interviewed for this study. Because exposure to Spanish and opportunities for use can vary by birth order even within the same household, it was important to tease apart generational differences between siblings. The median age for the first-born child was 10 years. The median age for the second-born was 6 years, and the median age for the third child was 4 years. Fifty-six percent of the children in these families were born in Nebraska; 10% were born in another U.S. location, and 34% were born in their parents' country. Only 21% of the children in these families had received any formal instruction in Spanish, all of them born outside of the United States. Median years of instruction in Spanish for these children was 3 years. All school-aged children in these households attended schools in which English was the language of instruction. Eight percent were studying or had completed high school; 17% were in middle school; 38% attended elementary school; 6% were in preschool, and 31% were not old enough to attend school. This information is summarized in Table 1.

In examining the language experience of these 19 families, an important question arises: Why study Spanish maintenance and loss in the U.S. Midwest? And within this region, why do it outside larger metropolitan areas with a longer history of Latino settlement, such as Chicago (Potoski, 2004) or Detroit (Tsuzaki, 1970)? From a policy perspective, a possible answer to this

Table 1. The Families

<i>The families</i>	
Median household size	5
Households with more adults than children	26%
Fathers who had lived in another U.S. location before moving to NE	37%
Mothers who had lived in another U.S. location before moving to NE	26%
Families in which 1 partner had lived in the United States longer than the spouse	58%
Families with children under 18 living in another country	11%
<i>The parents</i>	
Born in another country (89% born in Mexico)	100%
Native speakers of Spanish	100%
Median age (yrs) father/mother	37/35
<i>(Median age for foreign-born Latinos in NE: 34)*</i>	
Median years of schooling for both parents	9
Fathers who had never received formal instruction in English (reported)	63%
Mothers who had never received formal instruction in English	32%
Fathers who worked in construction and industrial sector	68%
Mothers who were homemakers	79%
<i>The children</i>	
Median age (yrs) of first-born child	10
<i>(Median age for native-born Latinos in NE: 13)*</i>	
Born in another country	34%
Born in NE	56%
Children who had received formal instruction in Spanish (all outside U.S.)	21%
School-aged children attending schools in which English was the language of instruction	100%

*Data from Pew Hispanic Research Center (2011)

question is that understanding language dynamics in households such as these can help us address the needs of children and adolescents growing up in communities that are part of what researchers have identified as the New Latino Diaspora (Wortham, Murillo, & Hamann, 2002), and that represent an increasingly important sector of the student population in the region. From a language acquisition perspective, these families allow us to analyze the impact of other adult native speakers living in the same household in relation to children's minority-language development. They allow us to study what happens in immigrant households where parents and children are undergoing different, but intersecting, processes of linguistic acquisition and loss. What happens, for example, when the parents set explicit household language use policies but children, by the fact that they are often more proficient in the majority language than their parents, transform these policies in implicit but significant ways (Touminen, 1999)? Finally, and perhaps most importantly, attempting to understand these families' language experiences from their own perspective invites us to abandon the methodological contrivance of conceptualizing intergenerational minority language transmission as an exclusively linguistic phenomenon that may be studied in isolation from other family dynamics. As will be discussed here, respondents in this study did not see linguistic transmission as separate from other parental concerns. The economic and emotional impact of social and demographic dislocation, the consequences of prolonged parent-child separation to family

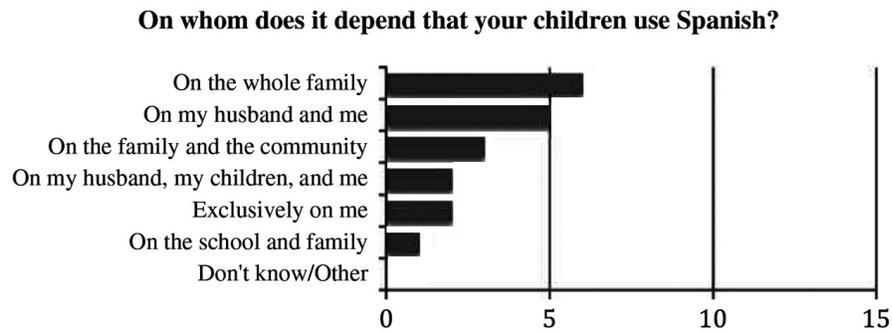


Figure 1. Perceptions of agency in children's use of Spanish (token).

structure (Suárez-Orozco, 2010; Suárez-Orozco & Todorova, 2003), and the struggle for economic mobility and integration to the wider community are but a few of these concerns. Not an epiphenomenon but key to understanding the role of Spanish and English in these families' everyday lives. The research agenda on Spanish maintenance and loss in the Midwest, then, is vast. This paper focuses on only 2 aspects: How do speakers understand their role in their own children's language development? and, What household practices do they perceive as conducive to Spanish language transmission?

Analysis

All of the mothers in this study responded that it was important to them that their children speak Spanish. This finding is consistent with previous research on parental attitudes toward Spanish transmission in U.S. Latino communities (Schechter & Bayley, 2002; Velázquez, 2009; Worthing & Rodríguez-Galindo, 2006). The present study, however, attempted to go a step further by asking if respondents perceived themselves as playing an active role in their children's linguistic development or not. Overall, mothers in this group did not perceive that their children's bilingual development depended exclusively on them. Only 2 respondents perceived that their children's use of Spanish depended exclusively on them, and only 1 of these 2 mothers perceived that her children's acquisition of English depended exclusively on her.⁵ In contrast, 11 mothers (or 58% of all respondents) perceived that fostering their children's use of Spanish depended either on her husband and her or on the whole family. When speaking about their family, several participants included extended family members living in the same household, in the same city, in other U.S. locations or in Mexico. Participant responses are presented in Figures 1, 2, and 3.

For most respondents in this study, perceived agency for children's use of Spanish was primarily located within the home and the family. In contrast, perceived agency for children learning English was primarily located in the school and the community. This would be expected in minority-language households in which the parents are not native speakers of English. What is worth noting, however, is that respondents did not perceive these as mutually exclusive. For example,

5. The other of these 2 mothers responded that her children's acquisition of English could not depend on her because she did not speak the language.

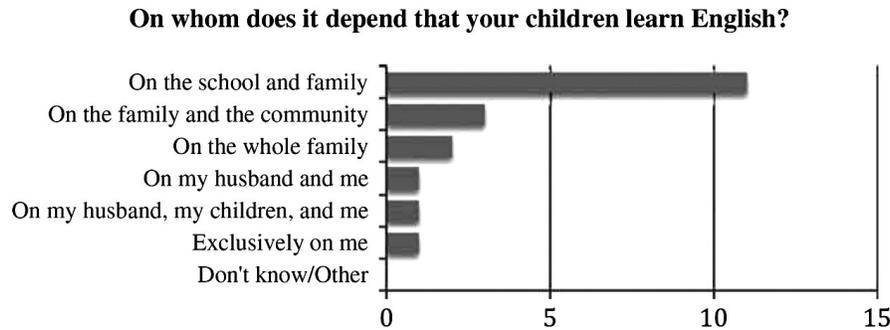


Figure 2. Perceptions of agency in children's development of English (token).

the 11 mothers who identified the school as having primary responsibility for their children's English development added that it was a responsibility that was shared between the family and the school. A difference was observed in responses to the items related to language, as opposed to the item related to academic development. While most respondents perceived that, to differing degrees, extended family, school, and community shared in the responsibility for their children's language development, slightly more than half perceived that the primary responsibility for their children's academic development lay exclusively with the parents. Only 1 or 2 respondents (depending on the question) expressly named their children as co-responsible for their own linguistic and academic development. Most likely, this is an error in the way the question was posed, but the question merits further investigation, as it relates to maternal expectations about their children's language use in the home. One participant in this study perceived that fostering her children's use of Spanish depended on both her family and her children's school. This is interesting because at the time of data collection, the only Spanish instruction available at the school was offered to Spanish-dominant preschoolers as a way to help them transition to English by the middle of the school year. The belief that the school would help their children maintain Spanish was encountered several times by the members of the research team in later interactions with other mothers in the same school. A supposition of this type may not be wholly unwarranted, considering the large number of Spanish-speaking families in the school, the members of the staff who tried to interact in Spanish with the parents, and the great effort that the school was making to involve

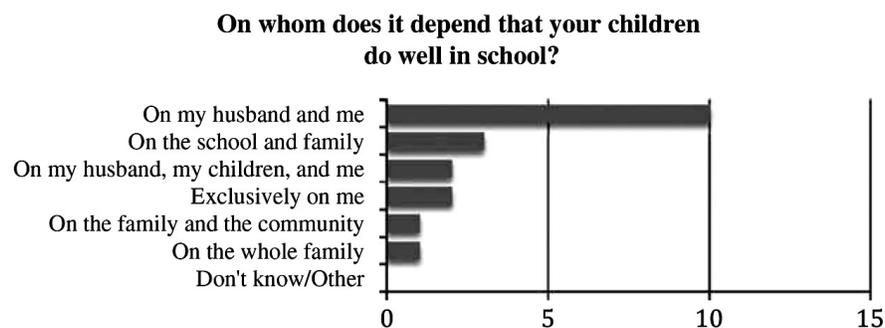


Figure 3. Perceptions of agency in children's academic achievement (token).

Table 2. Household Activities Perceived by Respondents as Contributing to Maintenance (Token)

<i>Three things that you normally do that help your children maintain Spanish</i>		<i>Three things that your husband normally does that help your children maintain Spanish</i>	
Talking to them/with them	19	Talking to them/with them	18
Praying, going to church, religious education	6	Going to the park, playing with them	6
Reading to them	5	Reading to them	3
Watching movies/TV	4	Eating together	2
Writing Spanish (mother, not with children)	3	Helping with homework	1
Reading Spanish (mother, not with children)	3	Telling them Spanish is important	1
Eating together	3	Reading Spanish (father, not with children)	1
Cooking together	3	Reading Bible in Spanish to them	1
Teaching them to write	2	Praying, going to church, religious education	1
Using bilingual services at the public library	2	Watching movies/TV	1
Going to the park, playing with them	2		
Singing together	1		
Listening to music	1		
Telling them it's important	1	<i>Total activities listed: 19</i>	
Arguing, scolding	1	<i>Activities listed for both parents: 8</i>	
Attending Latino community center programs	1	<i>Activities listed as exclusive of the mother: 9</i>	
Teaching them to recognize words	1	<i>Activities listed as exclusive of the father: 2</i>	

non-English-dominant families in the school community. School language policies, however, were accommodation/expediency oriented (Wiley, 2010), in that they were not intended to advance the use of Spanish either by the students or their families.

Household Activities Perceived as Contributing to Spanish Maintenance

All mothers in this study could name concrete activities in which they commonly engaged that, from their perspective, helped their children to maintain Spanish. All but 1 listed activities performed by their husband that served the same purpose. However, respondents' own recollection of each parents' contribution to the maintenance of the family language differed in number and quality. As a group, respondents identified 17 activities they commonly engaged in that helped their children to maintain Spanish, and they identified 10 activities for their husbands. Table 2 lists all answers given by respondents to the questions: What are 3 things that you normally do that help your children maintain Spanish? and, What are 3 things that your husband normally does that help your children maintain Spanish? While several activities were listed by respondents as commonly performed by both parents, 9 (or 47%) of all activities mentioned for either parent were listed as exclusive to the mother. The only 2 activities recalled by any respondent as exclusive to the father (helping with homework and reading the Bible in Spanish to their children) were mentioned only once.

It is important to clarify here that results presented in Table 2 do not imply that no other relevant activities took place in these households or that mothers and fathers did not engage in any

of the activities mentioned for the parent of the opposite gender. What will be argued here, however, is that those activities that were most easily recalled by respondents, activities that were *top-of-mind*, so to speak, corresponded to the most unmarked pattern of distribution of parental duties for their household. A difference in quality was also observed in the type of activities recalled by respondents as things either parent did to help the children maintain Spanish. Overall, activities listed as commonly performed by the mother required greater expenditure of time and effort, as well as planning and arrangement of family schedules. In an interesting example, 2 mothers in the study listed eating with their children as something their husbands did that helped them to maintain Spanish, presumably because it facilitated family interaction in the home language. This, however, was in fact an activity that required expenditure of time and energy on the part of the respondent, as it was the mother in these 2 households who was responsible for preparing family meals. Results in Table 2 point to a division of parenting duties and suggest that in these 19 families, regardless of whether she worked outside the home, the largest part of the task of children's socialization to and through Spanish rested largely on the shoulders of the mother.

In trying to understand language dynamics in these households, 2 pertinent questions arise: Which of the activities perceived by the mothers as helping their children maintain Spanish actually required them to use their home language beyond passive reception? And second, which of these activities, if any, were related to the development of literacy? An answer to the first question is important because any successful transmission effort must per force include use of the family language by the youngest generation. An answer to the second question is relevant because, save for the limited exposure to reading and writing in Spanish that a few of these children received through weekly religious education classes, 1 of the very few spaces where they could potentially develop literacy in Spanish was the home.

To different degrees, all activities listed by respondents exposed their children to Spanish. Not all of these activities, however, required the children to go beyond passive reception. Only 6 of the 19 activities identified by respondents as things either parent did expressly required the children to speak in Spanish with their parents or with other people. For example, 2 respondents in the group reported using the bilingual services offered at their public library. Another participant reported occasionally taking her children to participate in activities offered by the local Latino Community Center. For the purposes of this analysis, these activities were not counted as requiring children to engage in the family language, because children could participate successfully in both without having to use Spanish with either peers or adults. In contrast, *praying with children, taking them to church, and enrolling them in religious education classes*, which were recalled by 6 respondents as something they did to help their children maintain Spanish, were grouped in 1 category and counted as activities that fostered the use of the home language, because in these cases the language of worship and religious instruction was Spanish. Additionally, the children in 3 of these 6 families participated in church-affiliated youth groups in which interaction in Spanish was explicitly encouraged.

A very low number of mothers reported engaging in activities overtly linked to the development of Spanish literacy. Only 5 of the 19 respondents reported reading to their children in Spanish; 2 reported teaching them to write, 2 reported using the bilingual services offered at their public library, and 1 reported teaching her children to identify syllables and words. Later conversations between the members of the research team and several respondents suggest that some activities (such as cooking together, eating together, playing, and watching movies/TV), which were not considered activities overtly linked to the development of Spanish literacy in the original analysis,

were viewed by mothers as opportunities to teach their children vocabulary, narration, and basic math concepts (e.g., teaching measurements while cooking, answering children's questions while watching television, telling jokes, and telling stories about parents' childhoods or communities of origin). The most frequent response (4 mothers) to the question, What are 3 things that happen every week in your home or in your community that require your children to use Spanish? was talking on the phone with relatives in another city or country.

Recently, Torres and Hurtado-Vivas (2011) have called for schools to broaden and value the literacy practices present in Latino families, arguing against the use of Euro-American middle-class practices as the norm against which Latino parental involvement should be measured. Examining the low number of reports of school-sanctioned literacy practices in these families in light of Torres and Hurtado-Vivas's argument, it will be posited here that these results do not necessarily suggest that families were not engaging in literacy practices but that the instrument used in the present study, as well as the members of the research team, were ill-equipped to identify practices related to literacy development in this broader sense.

Perceived Obstacles to Children's Use of Spanish

As a way to investigate perceived obstacles to their children's use of Spanish, respondents were asked to identify the most difficult thing about making their children speak Spanish⁶ in 3 different domains: the home, the school, and the community. The domains of school and community were included to explore respondents' perception of the viability of their children's use of Spanish in these 2 domains external to the home. Slightly more than half of all mothers responded that there were no difficulties in making their children use Spanish at home. The responses of the other 9 mothers in the study suggest various degrees of shift to English in their households. Six mothers reported that their children did not understand some words, and that this was an obstacle to their use of Spanish at home. Although only 2 mothers reported their children's preference for English when interacting with their siblings, this general trend was observed in almost all households visited by members of the research team. One mother reported that her children sometimes refused or were unable to speak Spanish with her. The use of English by adult visitors was perceived by 1 mother as an obstacle to her children's use of Spanish in the home.

Overall, results suggest that respondents did not perceive the school to be a viable space for their children's use of Spanish. Eight mothers responded that the main obstacle to their children's use of Spanish in this domain was that it was neither spoken nor taught at school. Two responded that their children did not speak Spanish at school because their friends spoke English, and 1 mother cited both of these reasons for why her children didn't regularly use Spanish in school. Two mothers responded that there were no difficulties with their children using Spanish at school. The data is insufficient to elucidate, however, if this is because they perceived that their children could use Spanish in school without hindrance or because they perceived that they did not use Spanish in school at all. Six mothers did not respond to the item about perceived obstacles to their children's use of Spanish at school. Regarding the space of the community, 8 mothers perceived

6. The item was presented from the perspective of the mother (e.g., making children brush their teeth, complete their homework).

no obstacles to their children's using Spanish in this domain, while 2 perceived that the low number of speakers in the city reduced their children's opportunities to use Spanish outside the home. Interestingly, 3 respondents perceived that the main obstacle to their children's use of Spanish resided in their children, not the community. For example, 2 mothers discussed their disappointment in their children's inability to perform specific religious rituals entirely in Spanish, and another reported that her children mixed Spanish and English when interacting with people outside the home, a practice that she regarded as pragmatically inappropriate. Six mothers in this study did not respond to this question about obstacles.

Discussion

The main goal of this article has been to examine the ways in which a group of first-generation Latino immigrants to the United States understood their role in their children's bilingual development. Discussion has centered here on maternal perceptions of agency. Contrary to the original expectation that individuals with a greater sense of agency would identify themselves as primarily responsible for their children's bilingual development, 58% of all respondents perceived that fostering their children's use of Spanish depended on either herself and her husband or on the whole family. For several respondents, the conceptualization of family included extended family members living in their household, in the same city, in other U.S. locations, and in their country of origin. Most respondents perceived that agency for their children's Spanish development was located within the home and the family, while perceived agency for their children's English development was located in the school and the community. Results suggest, however, that respondents did not perceive these as mutually exclusive. A difference was observed in responses related to language, as opposed to academic development. While most respondents perceived that children's language development depended on the family, school, and community, slightly more than half perceived that children's academic development depended exclusively on the parents.

Interestingly, although most respondents perceived that agency for their children's bilingual development was shared, their own report of household practices identified as conducive to maintenance suggests that in these families, the largest share of the task of children's socialization to and through Spanish rested largely on the mother's shoulders. These findings are consistent with previous discussions on the gendered nature of intergenerational transmission of minority languages. To different degrees, all activities identified by respondents as conducive to maintenance were ones that exposed their children to Spanish. Not all of these activities, however, required the children to speak in Spanish. Additionally, a very low number of mothers reported engaging with their children in activities that were overtly linked to the development of literacy. Importantly, later conversations between the members of the research team and several respondents in this study suggest that activities such as cooking together, eating together, playing, and watching movies/TV were viewed by mothers as opportunities to teach their children vocabulary, narration, and basic math concepts.

Results involving perceived obstacles to children's use of Spanish at home, school, and community are inconclusive because 32% of all participants did not respond to the 2 items related to perceived obstacles at school and the community. This is a major limitation of this study. Results suggest that the 13 mothers who did respond to these items did not perceive the school to be a viable space for their children's use of Spanish. In contrast, 1 mother in the study perceived

that her children's development of Spanish depended both on her family and her children's school. The belief that the school would help their children maintain Spanish was encountered several times by the members of the research team in later interactions with other mothers in the same school, and merits further investigation. Data is insufficient to elucidate whether these mothers understood the school as a space for literacy development in general, or if they interpreted the school's effort to accommodate Latino families as a commitment to foster use of Spanish. Slightly more than half of all mothers in this study responded that there were no obstacles to their children's use of Spanish at home. The responses of the other 9 mothers in the study however, suggest various degrees of shift to English in their households. Regarding children's use of Spanish in the community, 8 mothers (42% of respondents) perceived no obstacles, while 2 perceived that a lack of speakers in the city reduced their children's opportunities to speak Spanish outside the home. Three respondents perceived that the main obstacle to their children's use of Spanish resided in their children, not the community, again, evidencing shift to English in these households. Greater explanatory power is needed to determine, for example, if respondents did not identify their children as agents in their own language development because they did not perceive them to be, or because of an error in the way the items were presented. Second, results on perceived obstacles to children's use of Spanish at home, school and community are inconclusive because 32% of all participants did not respond to these 2 items. Future avenues of inquiry would need to include the father's perceptions of agency, as well as single-parent households, families in which the parents are not the head of household (e.g., children being raised by grandparents or adult siblings), and households in which 1 parent is not a native speaker of Spanish.

Conclusion

This study has been an attempt to investigate the ways in which a group of first-generation Latino mothers in the U.S. Midwest conceptualize their own role in their children's bilingual development. It has been argued here that maternal perceptions of agency are dynamic, multidimensional, and socially constructed. Indeed, in all households, the way in which parents conceptualize their role in their children's development is mediated through the perceptions of others, and emerges through a process of social formation and re-formation (Fuchs, 2007; Kristiansen et al., 2005). In minority-language immigrant households, however, this process is further impacted by the experience of migration (Zhang, 2010). Additionally, parental self-perceptions in minority-language households are also impacted by the power imbalance that is created when the children in the family are more proficient in the language and culture of their new community (Touminen, 1999), and by the ongoing negotiation between local practices and understandings that are circulated in intracommunity social networks—in which the family language is vested with social capital—and larger intercommunity ideologies about immigrants, minority language use, and national identity (McGroarty, 2008; Olneck 2006; Woolard, 1998). Although the growth of Spanish in Nebraska is a recent phenomenon, and despite current anti-immigrant rhetoric, immigration and the use of languages other than English are part of the foundational narrative of the state, as Willa Cather's novel *My Ántonia* reminds us (1918/2005). The curiosity experienced by 10-year-old Jim Burden when he first encounters a group of Bohemian immigrants on their way to settle in the fictional town of Black Hawk at the beginning of the 20th century is an increasingly common

experience for residents of Nebraska cities and towns as the state's immigrant and refugee population grows. Key to the success in integrating these new Nebraskans to the fabric of the state is the recognition and appreciation of the talents and skills they bring to their new communities. Understanding immigrant households as sites for language development, and understanding immigrant mothers as agents in their family's well-being and possessors of funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Villenas, 2001), has deep consequences for their children's likelihood of educational success. The ways in which schools and other institutions approach these families depends largely on the ideological lenses through which they are viewed and determine whether their family language will be conceptualized as a resource or as a problem (García & Kleifgen, 2011). Nebraska, like many other locations in the New Latino Diaspora, has the historical opportunity to foster minority-language resources not only for the individual development of the speakers but for the economic and social development of the communities in which they live.

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