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Gendered Matters: Undocumented Mexican Mothers in the Current Policy Context

Michele Belliveau

Abstract
Feminist theorists have exchanged an exclusively gendered analysis for an intersectional lens that accounts for the multiple marginalized locations occupied by individuals in a hierarchy. This article uses both intersectional and feminist standpoint theories to analyze the findings from a qualitative study of undocumented Mexican mothers’ strategies of attaining resources for their children in the current policy context. Standpoint theory foregrounds the voices of undocumented Mexican mothers, while intersectional analysis illuminates their multiple and interacting social locations. The findings that mothers accessed some needed resources but not others are analyzed to demonstrate the relevance of intersectional analysis to policy development and practice.

Keywords
intersectionality, public benefits, undocumented Mexican mothers

Critical feminist theory, as an amalgam of critical and feminist theories, seeks to illuminate oppression in social institutions, particularly oppression experienced by women, with the goal of addressing it (Breitkreuz, 2005). With roots in critical feminist thought, intersectional theory provides a means to understand the connection between structural oppression and the individual experiences of women who are diverse by race, class, and ethnicity. Intersectionality developed as a construct in response to criticism that an exclusively gendered analysis masked the compound marginalization experienced by women of color (Crenshaw, 1995; Hill Collins, 2000). For this reason, the theory has taken root in the feminist and social science literature that is interested in (a) problematizing the construction of identity in dichotomous terms (Hill Collins, 1993), (b) understanding how social locations shape experiences (Josephson, 2002), and (c) illuminating how forms of oppression act in concert rather than independently (Richardson & Taylor, 2008).

To demonstrate the usefulness of intersectional analysis to social work practice, this article draws from a larger body of qualitative data on the strategies that undocumented Mexican mothers used to

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obtain public benefits and services for their U.S.-born children in a new, suburban immigrant community (Belliveau, 2007) and applies an intersectional lens to select the findings. The research design and method were informed by feminist principles of social science inquiry. Feminist “standpoint” epistemology, as articulated by Smith (1987), is concerned with the everyday lived experiences of women and responds to women’s position in society as devalued or silenced (Hughes, 2002). Standpoints, in themselves, are not social locations but are the unique and critical knowledge that individuals have on the basis of their social location (Edmonds-Caty, 2009). As articulated by intersectional theory and the concept of “multiple consciousness” (Hesse-Biber, Leavy, & Yaiser, 2004), standpoints are the unique knowledge that individuals have on the basis of their multiple, convergent, marginalized locations. The experiences of women in the study were gendered, but they were also shaped by the women’s statuses as undocumented immigrants, mothers, and recipients of services in a new immigrant community.

Given that intersectional analysis has much to offer a social work ideology that is committed to transformational change, it has gained some visibility in the social work literature (see, e.g., Hulko, 2009; Mizrahi & Lombe, 2007). Intersectionality resonates with social work in that it views social categories as the stratification that occurs through the practices of individuals and institutions, rather than only as the characteristics of individuals (Cole, 2008). Intersectional theory, therefore, offers an opportunity to analyze the impact of social welfare policies on vulnerable populations with the goal of creating more responsive and humane policies. However, despite its apparent “fit” with social work, few concrete examples exist of how to translate an intersectional perspective into practice (Murphy, Hunt, Zajicek, Norris, & Hamilton, 2009).

While legal scholars have used an intersectional lens to analyze the disparate impact of laws based on race, class, and gender, other scholars have highlighted the inherent tension between intersectionality and the study of social policy. Whereas public policies tend to be categorical, reductionist, and exclusionary (Manuel, 2006), intersectionality embraces complexity, eschews categorical thinking, and recognizes that individuals interact with public policies in fluid ways, depending on the knowledge they have gained from the multiple social locations that they occupy. This recognition has spawned scholarship that has cited the methodological challenges posed by, among other things, the “murkiness” of intersectionality (Bowleg, 2008; Nash, 2008).

To demonstrate the explanatory power of intersectional analysis, I use it both to highlight the experiences of those in multiple marginalized positions and to point toward policy solutions that are consonant with social work values and ethics. In the debate over social welfare policy and immigration reform, the voices of undocumented Mexican mothers have been relatively silent. Undocumented Mexican mothers experience this invisibility because of the societal discrimination they face as ethnic minority women and as women who are “illegal.” The invisibility of undocumented Mexican mothers stems from both their “hidden” status and the refusal of state institutions to recognize them, even though their contributions, either as workers or as producers of future workers, are an integral part of the local economy (Chavez, 1992). This contradiction is one manifestation of the intersections of immigrant status, nationality, gender, and motherhood that the women in the study experienced. In the sections that follow, I describe the macroprocesses that make the experiences of undocumented Mexican mothers and their children essential knowledge for social work practice, the study that emerged to inform this knowledge base, an analysis of the findings using intersectionality to illuminate the impact of interacting marginal social locations on undocumented Mexican families, and how mothers’ standpoints can inform the development of social policy and social work practice.

**Background and Significance**

**Demographic Transformation**

Significant demographic shifts in U.S. immigration patterns have occurred over the past two decades. Among these shifts have been the growth in undocumented migration from Mexico, the
suburbanization of new migration (Singer, 2004), and the feminization of undocumented Mexican migration (Massey, Durand, & Malone, 2002). While earlier migrant flows were comprised mostly of men, transformations in U.S. labor markets, modifications in U.S. immigration policies that emphasized family reunification, and shifting gender relations in Mexico changed the sex composition of Mexican immigrants (Greenlees & Saenz, 1999). In 2008, an estimated 11.9 million undocumented immigrants were residing in the United States, 4.1 million of whom were women and 59% of whom came from Mexico (Passel & Cohn, 2009). Current immigration policy restricts undocumented immigrants’ ability to legalize their status, thereby making it more likely that the undocumented population will grow. Moreover, current welfare policy bars undocumented immigrants from receiving most public benefits and services.

Restricted access to public resources occurs even though the majority of children in immigrant families are U.S. citizens and eligible for the benefits that their parents are unable to obtain (Fomby & Cherlin, 2004; Reardon-Anderson, Capps, & Fix, 2002). The number of U.S.-born children in families with at least one undocumented parent—deemed “mixed-status families”—grew to 4 million in 2008, up from 2.7 million in 2003 (Passel & Cohn, 2009). In the current policy environment that bars undocumented immigrants from most public benefits and restricts their ability to become legal residents, parents’ immigrant status is believed to affect family welfare negatively.

Despite an increase in female migration from Mexico, scholars have noted the absence of women in the migration literature (Boyd & Grieco, 2003; Cerrutti & Massey, 2001; Cobb-Clark & Kossoudji, 1999; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Kanaiaupuni, 2000). Among other reasons, this absence has been attributed to the fact that women are (a) considered the followers of male migrants (or “associational migrants”) and (b) are assumed to migrate for family reasons (Cerrutti & Massey, 2001). More recently, scholars have made female migration and settlement, as reflections of global economic processes, a pivotal subject (Berger, 2004; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2003; López-Garza, 2001; Parreñas, 2001).

Despite their “associational” status, women are seen as increasingly important actors in new patterns of migration and family settlement. By the 1970s, Mexican women and their families were already integral to the building and settlement of U.S. immigrant communities (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994). Research conducted in the decades since have shown that family welfare and institutional negotiation, both important aspects of Mexican settlement, are primarily the responsibility of women, particularly mothers (Campbell, 2008; Chavira-Prado, 1992; Guendelman, Makin, Herr-Harthorn, & Vargas, 2001). It was Mexican women’s ability to mobilize their families toward permanent settlement that, in Chang’s (1993) opinion, motivated U.S. xenophobia and the anti-immigrant policies that it spawned.

The Policy Context

During the research period that began in 2004 and ended in 2006, a well-publicized national debate about undocumented immigrants helped both to define the policy context navigated by undocumented Mexican mothers and to illuminate where systems of domination converged to produce structural intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1995). The passage of House legislation spurred a number of protests in support of the rights of undocumented immigrants who were viewed as deserving of membership, not exclusion, on the basis of their contributions to the economy. Despite these protests, comprehensive immigration reform was never realized and was instead tabled for a future congress to resolve.

The current policy context for undocumented immigrants remains contentious and ambiguous. In fall 2009, during the debate over health care reform, undocumented immigrants were the focus of a heated exchange among legislators over access to government-subsidized health care. As with the legislative debates that had swirled during the time of the research, this discourse reemphasized undocumented immigrants’ “otherness” by reaffirming their exclusion from governmental benefits
and cast a pallor over the future of immigration reform. The extent to which legal and undocumented immigrants are barred from public benefits is generally underappreciated (Fix & Passel, 1994). Undocumented adult immigrants have never been eligible to receive public benefits other than government-funded medical coverage (Medicaid) in the event of an emergency. The 1996 social welfare and immigration legislation banning unauthorized immigrants from receiving public benefits merely made explicit the exclusions that were already written into law (Potocky-Tripodi, 2002).

Arguments against state and federal initiatives to bar undocumented immigrants from public resources focus on the unintended negative effects that such initiatives have on citizen children whose undocumented parents fear the consequences of applying for benefits, despite their children’s eligibility (Fix & Zimmerman, 1999). Although these effects are important and were reemphasized in the research, they neglect the experiences of immigrant mothers with social welfare policies as a legitimate matter of concern. Intersectional analysis, in accounting for mothers’ multiple social locations, “advances the telling” (Crenshaw, 1995) of the mothers’ unique stories. Moreover, intersectionality reveals how policies that are designed to burden one group—undocumented adults seeking state benefits—exacerbate the marginalization of those who are already subordinated by structures of domination (Crenshaw, 1995), in this case Mexican women and their children.

The Study

For the study, 20 undocumented mothers were recruited through a local maternal and child health program for in-depth interviews conducted in their homes in Spanish. All the women had arrived in the United States between 1997 and 2004, after the passage of the 1996 welfare and immigration legislation, and had settled in a nontraditional suburban immigrant-receiving community in the northeast. All but one of the mothers were partnered or married; most had incomes that were significantly below, below, or just slightly above the federal poverty thresholds for their family size. The majority of mothers had either one or two children living with them; four families had three children, and only one family had four children living in their households. Between them, the 20 mothers had 43 children. Of the 43 children, 22 were younger than age 3, and 21 were aged 3–5 or older. The average age of the mothers was 26 years, with the youngest being 19 and the oldest being 34. Of the 20 women, 18 had worked in the United States either presently (5) or in the past (13). Those who no longer worked had stopped when their first child was born, often performing physical labor into their last month of pregnancy, although two mothers in this group had been recently laid off and planned to return to work as soon as they could find another job.

Open-ended, unstructured interviews were suited to the research questions and allowed for an inductive process of knowledge building. Several research questions guided the study: (a) How did the undocumented Mexican mothers I interviewed perceive their reception into the local social welfare system in a nontraditional immigrant-receiving community? What meanings did they develop from their experiences with the policy environment? (b) How did this perceived reception affect their ability to obtain resources—such as food, clothing, health care, and official documents—for themselves and their children? (c) What navigational strategies or “strategies of access” did the mothers use to meet the needs of their children vis-à-vis the social welfare system? (d) What role did local health and social service providers who serve the needs of women and children play in the strategies that these undocumented mothers developed? and (e) How did local providers view the reception, strategies, and needs of undocumented Mexican mothers and their children?

Questions, instruments, and consent forms were developed in English and Spanish and received full approval from the institutional review board of the university at which I was studying. In addition to the unique perspectives of the mothers, I sought the perspectives of health and social service providers who were familiar with the needs of undocumented Mexican mothers in the community, the majority of whom were women (22 of the 27 who were interviewed). A combination of in-depth
interviews in the mothers’ homes, interviews with the providers, member check interviews, informal interviews with friends and family members, agency-based observation, and a review of documents (e.g., public benefit applications and agency pamphlets) provided a “snapshot” understanding of the mothers’ and providers’ lived experiences in the new suburban immigrant community.

The data analysis for the research was iterative and inductive, with themes and theory emerging directly from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Data in the form of transcripts of and notes on the interviews, field notes, and documents were inductively coded and categorized. While coding, I compared the data with previous data that were coded in similar and different groups in the same category to generate the theoretical properties of a category (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The trustworthiness of the analysis was enhanced by engaging in the triangulation of data, method, and theory, as well as member checking, both on the spot and as a follow-up to the interviews (Denzin, 1989).

**Findings**

All 20 mothers had successfully applied for and accessed Women, Infants and Children (WIC) and government-sponsored health insurance for their children, in large part with the assistance of “entry-point” agencies, such as the maternal and child health program. This fact illuminated the intersections of gender and motherhood that connected the mothers to resources. However, there were at least two resources—food stamps and child care—that the mothers were eligible to receive on behalf of their children but were reluctant to access, illuminating the intersections of immigrant status and nationality that prevented their connection to resources. These two resources are described in greater detail later.

During the interviews, it emerged that misinformation had circulated through providers’ and immigrants’ social networks about undocumented mothers’ eligibility for child care and the long-term effects of receiving food stamps. However, hearsay alone was not enough to affect the mothers’ strategies for attaining resources. The mothers viewed the Food Stamp Program as public assistance, whereas they did not view other types of governmental assistance this way, for reasons that included more frequent recertification for eligibility and the need to reveal all family members in the household, a particular deterrent for families who shared housing with at least one other family (more than three quarters of the sample). In contrast, in describing Medicaid or the state-sponsored Children’s Health Insurance Program, at least half the mothers referred to it as “health insurance” or “the card.” Child care was unique in that it was viewed, albeit incorrectly as it turned out, as a benefit that was attached to a mother’s legal status but not that of her child. Perceptions of benefit reflected the undocumented Mexican mothers’ unique and intersectional social location where immigrant status created barriers that were both real and perceived.

The experiences and challenges of the women who were interviewed are not adequately captured or addressed in discrete categories of “undocumented immigrant,” “mother,” “low income,” or “Mexican.” Although the mothers’ experiences are organized in the social categories of “undocumented immigrants” and “mothers” in what follows, the application of an intersectional lens revealed where the women’s multiple statuses converged to create unique experiences, perceptions, and strategies of attaining resources for their children.

**Experiences as Undocumented Immigrants**

The mothers’ experiences as undocumented or “unauthorized” persons both prevented and stimulated their strategies for accessing resources. The mothers’ inability to work as a result of child care issues informed their perceptions of both their immigrant status and gendered reception in U.S. society as much as their experiences with work. At least six mothers expressed the desire to send their
children to formal child care centers where they said providers were licensed and passed background checks and where their children could learn English. However, such care was unaffordable to all the women without a governmental subsidy that they believed they were not eligible to receive because of their undocumented status. One mother, Ana (all the names are pseudonyms that were chosen by the mothers), described her desire for formalized care and the expense she could not afford without a governmental subsidy. While her words could be those of poor women who are citizens and cannot afford child care, they revealed the unique standpoint of a woman who believed that she was ineligible for assistance on the basis of her immigrant status:

Ana: When she [her daughter] turned 6 months, I went back to work, but it cost me too much to pay for child care.

Interviewer: How much did you pay?

Ana: $175 per week, ... but I couldn’t do this.

Interviewer: Who provided the care?

Ana: A day care.

Interviewer: And how was the day care center, besides being too expensive?

Ana: Good, very good. I’d prefer to leave my child with a day care center than leave her in the care of whatever person because [such people] haven’t prepared or studied how to take care of children. ... There are people who charge per day, but I didn’t like them. I didn’t trust these people.

Interviewer: And were these people you knew, like friends, acquaintances?

Ana: People who told me, “I know this person who takes care of children.” I would go out of necessity because I had to go to work, but I never felt comfortable leaving my child in such an environment for more than a week. Because I didn’t trust them.

Interviewer: Yes. I’ve had other people tell me the same thing, and the problem is that the centers cost too much money.

Ana: Too much. It’s impossible. It’s impossible to pay $175 per week when I am earning $8 per hour.

As with other services, the mothers’ perceptions influenced their behavior and signified, in their view, their social position in the community. For example, three mothers, Ana, Perla, and Mariana, all described themselves as individuals “without rights” in relation to their perceived ineligibility for child care subsidies. Because of the lack of child care care, the inability to work—the primary reason given for migration—contributed to some mothers’ feelings of social exclusion not only as newcomers to the United States but among Mexicans in the United States and was one facet of their intersectional invisibility.

In their role as mothers, the women were forced to reckon with their immigrant status in a way they may not have faced as women without children, specifically in seeking affordable, center-based child care. As workers, the mothers said they had been able to procure false identification or were paid in cash; as mothers seeking subsidized child care, they could not use the same strategies and so were more aware of the limitations that their undocumented status imposed. Some mothers, however, had (and/or were willing to voice) a heightened awareness of the policies that affected them as undocumented workers, irrespective of their familial status. Ana, for example, described the injustice she perceived because of her immigrant status: “We can’t get health insurance like other people here; ... we have to work for social security and that they take it out of your check, and you can’t recuperate what they take out. [As for] the driver’s license, they won’t give [it] to us.”

Experiences of marginalization, perceptions of injustice, and an attendant disillusionment with U.S. life could influence a mother’s willingness to apply for governmental assistance. Among the mothers, Ana, Yolanda, and Cecelia took a more critical look at U.S. life and perceived most acutely the discrimination they faced. The three mothers also reported the most significant perceptions of systemic discrimination: Ana in her (perceived) disqualification from subsidized child care, Yolanda with her employer, and Cecelia with the welfare department. In choosing vigorous self-advocacy over acquiescence, Cecelia acted in ways that contradicted the image of undocumented women
described by a case manager in the community: “What undocumented mother will put up a fight, even for a citizen child? First of all, how do you go in and fight a battle when you don’t speak the language?” Opting to “put up a fight,” Cecelia was most acutely aware of the actual barriers she faced. Cecelia’s undocumented 7-year-old son experienced frequent ear infections that, if left untreated, would lead to significant hearing loss in both ears. Cecelia had lobbied the state welfare and hospital systems to pay for an operation, to no avail. Her disillusionment, and attendant willingness to seek public resources, was palpable, as noted in my notes from the interview:

Cecelia said her son has had ear infections for the past three years and that he desperately needs an operation to correct the problem. She said at one point he was covered under her husband’s health insurance through work but that he had since lost that insurance. Cecelia’s son has suffered some hearing loss already (10% in one ear, 20% in the other) and is in danger of losing more without the operation. However, they cannot afford to pay for it. Cecelia said she had tried to “get welfare to pay for it, but they said it is not an emergency. Can you imagine? One has to be deaf or dead before they will say it’s an emergency.” Cecelia said she had been successful in getting the welfare department to pay for some of her son’s hospital bills that were considered emergencies. In reference to welfare’s unwillingness to help pay for her son’s operation, Cecelia said “they have their rules, and one has to deal with them.”

A conversation with Yolanda at member checking time also revealed a heightened consciousness of the conditions of marginality experienced by undocumented Mexicans in the United States, a consciousness that ultimately proved useful to her in applying for public resources, as in my notes from the interview: We talked some more about where Yolanda was from, her education, and how she wished she could continue her nursing studies here, but “without a social security number, one cannot do much.” I asked if she was considering staying in the U.S. to continue her education in light of the new immigration laws under consideration. Yolanda immediately responded, “Oh, this is an important time for us immigrants. But there is so much discrimination, and people focus on what is good but ignore that only about 5% of what is proposed is good while 95% is bad for us.” The reflections of Yolanda, Cecelia, and Ana more closely resembled the marginalization experienced by racial and ethnic minorities with a longer history of discrimination in the United States (Longres, 1991). In addition to envisioning themselves as part of a community of hard workers and binational citizens, Yolanda, Cecelia, and Ana related to a community of individuals who faced discrimination and exploitation on account of their undocumented status. Therefore, the economic and social hardship of life in the United States was not always a “risk worth taking” when compared to life in Mexico (Goodson-Lawes, 1993) as it was for some of the other mothers whom I interviewed. From an intersectional perspective, the marginality of undocumented status was exacerbated by the Mexican mothers’ experiences of racism and inequality. Such experiences stimulated a willingness to access public benefits on behalf of their children, both citizen and undocumented. The next section describes how perceptions of the federal Food Stamp Program illuminated the intersections of undocumented status, nationality, and gender.

**Food Stamp Program.** Yolanda, Cecelia, and Ana were among the eight mothers who had applied for food stamps, the one resource that most women in the sample were reluctant to use. For most mothers who were interviewed, food items existed in a “gray area” of affordability when viewed through the ideological lens of “necessity.” As one longtime health advocate observed, the Mexican mothers were “distintas” (different) regarding the acceptance of food distributed during program events in that they “held back and took whatever is left over,” whereas the “Americans” filled their plates at the beginning. The juxtaposition of Mexican clients’ modes of seeking resources with that of “American” clients’ modes represented a broader marginalizing discourse of race and was repeated by several service providers, casting the former as positive and the latter as negative.
Images of the model service recipient were not lost on the mothers who wanted agency assistance but, on account of their undocumented status, feared the negative repercussions of their help-seeking actions. The mothers’ ideological explanations and refusals to apply for certain public benefits reflected a marginalized position and the perceived need to defend against negative stereotypes. Rocio (who had not applied for food stamps) described this ideology

In Mexico, the majority of the people work for their check. They aren’t working for a company or anything. But if you work for a company, you have many benefits . . . . And the people who work for their check . . . . if you don’t work, there is no food. So you can see there is a big difference. And here, it’s the same; here, if you don’t work, it’s because you don’t want to get ahead because the opportunity we’ve had, in the type of work we do, in the restaurants, in the yard work, in where we work, if someone doesn’t work, it’s because they don’t want to get ahead. They don’t want to progress. And sometimes I realize there are people here who want nothing more than to get something from the government. They are just waiting until they [the government] give to them, give to them, give to them.

For several women, the Food Stamp Program, like cash assistance, was to be avoided. Those who spoke of a desire to adjust their legal status one day and stay in the United States feared they would be denied the right to stay because they had received governmental assistance. This criterion for exclusion, known in immigration law as being a “public charge,” was used in the evaluation of applications for citizenship to determine if an applicant was likely to rely on the state. While the use of benefits that formed the core of welfare’s “work supports” (food stamps and medical assistance) did not deem an immigrant applicant a “public charge,” the use of cash assistance did. This fact was significant to the undocumented Mexican mothers for at least two reasons: (a) the lingering specter of being a public charge was enough to deter them from applying for some benefits, particularly for those mothers who stated that they wanted to adjust their legal status and (b) the fact that, barring a blanket amnesty (or “earned path to citizenship”), under current immigration law, a person who entered the country in an undocumented status could not apply for legal residence once here. Therefore, the mothers who did not want to apply for benefits because of their fears of being a public charge forewent an income support in the hope of adjusting to a legal status that would not, under the current law, be possible. Such “strategies of acquiescence” demonstrated how policies that are designed to prevent newcomers from depending on the state exacerbate the disempowerment of women and children in mixed-status families.

The content of the rumors that circulated about food stamps differed but had in common the underlying, cynical theme of governmental control over children and the relative powerlessness of Mexican parents to intercede (Belliveau, 2010). The following exchange with Maria (who had applied for Medicaid and WIC for her children, but not for food stamps) was indicative of several mothers’ fears that were based on hearsay:

Interviewer: Have you applied for food stamps?
Maria: No.
Interviewer: No. Why? Or do you know if you qualify or not?
Maria: [The maternal and child health advocate] told me I could qualify and that I could get them for the children. But also I went to [another agency], and they told me if I accept so many things from the government, when I want to leave the country, they aren’t going to let me take my children with me.
Interviewer: Yes?
Maria: Yes. It’s as if you are giving your children to the government because they [the government] are supporting (manteniendo) them.
Interviewer: So, when you want to leave the country, they can take your children?
Maria: Yes.
When the benefits of receiving the subsidy outweighed the costs, the mothers, including those who had heard rumors, either applied or considered applying for food stamps. In addition to the advocacy efforts of outside agencies, two other factors increased the mothers’ willingness to apply: (a) increased financial hardship and/or (b) increased disillusionment with life in the United States for Mexicans. Conversely, the mothers with a greater investment in future and permanent U.S. settlement were more reluctant to apply for food stamps. For example, one mother, Rocio, was interested in adjusting her status and was invested in her eldest (undocumented) son’s specialized education services, which she said were not available in Mexico. The mothers who made such cost-benefit analyses were strategic within limiting structures, but felt compelled to choose one resource over another. Such double binds reflected the intersecting marginal locations of gender, class, nationality, and immigrant status.

Experiences as Mothers

The women’s experiences as mothers illuminated the particular intersections of undocumented immigrant status, nationality, and gender. While several mothers described their children as “a blessing,” some also lamented the loss of social contacts that they had forged through work. The mothers described the gendered social isolation that came from being “inside with children all day,” an isolation that was exacerbated by their fears of leaving their homes (because of safety concerns). The experience of being physically and socially isolated in the United States was common to 13 mothers. These mothers described their lives in the United States as “una vida más encerrada [a life more shut in or confined].” By contrast, their male partners were less isolated because of their access to social networks that were forged through work and leisure activities. Mariana, who felt particularly burdened by the needs of twin infants and an energetic 4-year-old, also described her desire to work in terms of the break it might afford and the financial necessity: “I would like to put my children into day care because there is no rest, but because we are Mexican and have no papers, it’s a problem… These are my children, and children are a blessing, but I need to work.”

As with other mothers who wanted to work but had relinquished their worker role to stay home with their children, Mariana was somewhat wistful about her predicament, an interpretation that revealed the unique, intersectional marginalities of low-wage work, nationality, immigrant status, and motherhood. An important point is that this was something that the mothers had not experienced—or did not envision—as working mothers in Mexico because of the level of familial social support available there in raising their families. The following passage from my notes describes Cecelia’s thoughts on this difference:

Cecelia also said that in Mexico she worked in a hospital as a cleaner, but that here she cannot work. Plus, in Mexico her mother took care of her children while she worked. She made clear several times that her quality of life was much poorer in the United States, noting that in Mexico, she had family, freedom to go outdoors, her own wardrobe in the bedroom, better clothing, and makeup… Cecelia blamed her inability to work directly for this poorer quality of life.

The mothers described their lives as confined not only to their homes but to the community. In feeling responsible for the health and welfare of their families in both Mexico and the United States, they felt emotionally stressed because of their decreased mobility. Contrary to the mobile and flexible connotation of new immigrants’ transnationalism (Ong, 1999), the mothers I interviewed experienced a gender-based lack of mobility in their binational lives. They told stories of husbands going back and forth across the border but did not feel they could take this risk because of stricter border control and their fear of separation from their children.

The social isolation that the mothers experienced was important insofar as it influenced their access to information and resources. Although mothers experienced oppressive structures on
account of their interlocking social locations, it was also on account of these locations that providers reached out, thus carving out spaces of privilege in an otherwise marginalizing context. The “coaxing” efforts of entry-point agency advocates were particularly important for the mothers, who described the skepticism of reluctant husbands in applying for governmental resources. While the mothers were primarily responsible for negotiating with institutions on behalf of their families, their husbands were often behind the scenes casting doubt on their decisions to accept outside assistance. Maria Led, whose husband had made several migrations to the United States and had a strong male-based information network, believed that women were more open to seeking assistance “outside the circle” than were men. Maria Led’s perception was consistent with that of the providers in the study, as well as the findings on gender-differentiating decision making and political behavior among first-generation Latino immigrants (Jones-Correa, 1998). The providers, therefore, described the practices they used to assuage male pride, distrust, and concerns as expressed mainly through the doubts of mothers. One maternal and child health advocate described her efforts to contradict respectfully one mother’s erroneous information about governmental services obtained from her husband (as I described in my notes):

A said that as far as the rumors were concerned, they were “like a snowball” in the community. She said she had one client who did not want to apply for food stamps because the uncle of her husband had told her husband that their child would have to pay it back when he grows up. A said she has also heard people say that immigration will come find them if they apply. I asked how she responded, for example, to the client who said the first thing, about having to pay it back. A said “with all due respect to your husband’s uncle, the answer is “no.” She said she assured the client that in her six years of doing this work, nothing bad had ever happened to anyone who applied for food stamps. She said she understands that people are afraid because when you apply, you have to present certain papers, but that she assures them, “You’re not applying for cash. It’s food stamps, and it’s for your child.”

This approach represented a provider strategy of “distancing,” in this case depersonalizing, by putting distance between the erroneous information and the person in possession of it. In this way, entry-point agency workers based their interventions on mothers’ experiences as undocumented Mexican women and addressed misinformation in the community that spread through male networks. As Crenshaw (1995) argued in her analysis of immigrant women’s unique experiences of domestic violence, where systems of race, gender, and class domination converge, “intervention strategies based solely on the experiences of women who do not share the same race or class backgrounds will be of limited help to women who face different obstacles because of race and class” (p. 358). By verifying the accuracy of information with agency staff, the mothers resisted gendered forms of power and regulation that were rooted in the possession of information (Ong, 2003).

**Discussion and Implications for Social Policy and Practice**

A broader, intersectional understanding of access to resources accounts for the “multiple locations” of undocumented Mexican mothers and their families. Although the mothers experienced similar economic, social, and political conditions in the community, their responses to such conditions varied. The particular subjectivity that was forged, for example, through comparisons of relative poverty, while making living conditions in the United States more bearable for undocumented Mexican mothers, may also have thwarted the initiative to protest or seek the resources they believed they needed, conceptualized as “strategies of acquiescence.” Conversely, the mothers who perceived extreme hardship on account of their undocumented status, as well as their children’s undocumented status, displayed a willingness to pursue social welfare benefits in a manner similar to mothers who displayed more acute levels of political consciousness and perceived discrimination on account of
their undocumented Mexican status. That these mothers expressed fewer reservations about applying for benefits suggests that one factor in strategy making was the mothers’ connections to an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983) that could either increase or mitigate feelings of marginalization and have a subsequent impact on access to state resources.

The interplay of social location and imagined community was a function of nationality, gender, motherhood, and the larger processes of globalization and migration. The mothers who were interviewed were perceived and alternately perceived themselves as low-wage workers in the United States, who could make claims on the state because their labor was integral to the economy, hard-working immigrants with no need for public assistance from the state, and undocumented immigrants who were not entitled to rights and benefits from the state.

That the mothers connected to multiple communities reveals the shortcomings of explanations for access to benefits and resources that are based on essentialist notions of Mexican, Latina, women’s, and/or immigrant groups. The mothers’ expectations and actions were influenced, but not fixed, by where they came from or where they landed; they were fluid processes with intermingling tensions. Intersectional analysis provides a way both to subvert immigrant mothers’ subordination by foregrounding their experiences and to illuminate the unique ways in which interlocking oppressions affect access to resources for children in mixed-status immigrant families.

The mothers’ strategies demonstrated and contested multiple marginalities at the same time, suggesting that the concept of invisibility is dynamic and rarely fixed. For instance, in accessing a maternal and child health program, the mothers refused the restrictions placed on their mobility by gender, geography, and undocumented status. However, access to agency services both contested and underscored their invisibility; as women, their role was strengthened by agency practices that provided information that contradicted the information that circulated within male-based networks and broke their isolation, yet they could access these resources only as mothers of citizen children. However, a mother’s perception of her child’s mobility through access to opportunity had the potential to mitigate her own experiences with restricted mobility and hardship. To view the mothers’ hopes and fears as separate from their children was not possible in most instances, despite the fact that the mothers and children had different legal statuses and rights to benefits.

**Implications for Policy and Practice**

Under current U.S. immigration policy, the fact that an estimated 11.9 million undocumented immigrants are living in the United States (Passel & Cohn, 2009) is not addressed. While immigration reform was beyond the expertise and goals of this research, that the future of immigration reform was both contentious and unclear helped define the social welfare policy context that the mothers in the study navigated. The fact that there are 4 million citizen children living in undocumented families (Passel & Cohn, 2009) and that of the 31 citizen children in the study, 21 did not receive all the public benefits to which they were entitled suggests implications for immigration policy in relation to social welfare (Padilla, 1997).

**Implications for policy.** The fact remains that the mothers who were interviewed did apply for some governmental benefits but not for others, a finding that highlights the mothers’ perceptions of the different programs that were based, in part, on their “universality.” Critical feminist theorists have argued for universal social welfare programs that destabilize, rather than promote, group differentiation and, ultimately, prevent unintended stigmatization and maintenance of the status quo (Fraser, 1997). Resonant with this argument for programs that destabilize group differences, an essential feature of feminist politics is the forging of alliances that manage to combine an understanding of difference with the common experiences of exploitation (McDowell, 2008). The experiences of the women in the study, analyzed through an intersectional lens, emphasize unique standpoints at the
same time that they reveal commonalities with other marginalized women. Advocacy for universal programs (such as child care and health care) can create a public rhetoric that focuses on problems that affect not only poor women but women from all classes and emphasizes programs that promote economic improvement for all segments of society, not just the economically marginalized (Wilson, 1996). This argument can be extended to destabilize the marginalizing discourse of citizenship that made the undocumented mothers in the study skeptical of needed public resources for their children.

A more universal system would not preclude the ability to target vulnerable populations (Iyer, Sen, & Ostlin, 2008). Current antipoverty policies that target beneficiaries along a single dimension, such as income, risk missing those who are vulnerable on the basis of their other intersecting dimensions (e.g., low-income citizen children of undocumented Mexican mothers). As Murphy et al. (2009, p. 71) argued, the acknowledgment of interacting social locations can lead policy makers to “be more effective in creating polices that improve both individual and societal well-being through the appropriate allocation of limited resources to the intended beneficiaries.” In the current policy context, children in mixed-status families absorb the simultaneous impact of anti-immigrant policy and their parents’ economic marginalization.

**Implications for practice.** Effective social work practice with undocumented Mexican women and their families recognizes that people are members of more than one community at the same time. Such simultaneity calls for creative modes of outreach and intervention that respond to the unique isolation and invisibility that the mothers in the study experienced. Although all social categories that the women in the study experienced were important, to connect them to services for their children, effective providers determined which category was more salient in a given context (Murphy et al., 2009). For example, by acknowledging the rumors that circulated in the undocumented Mexican community about governmental benefits, providers with good information mitigated the impact of rumors on the mothers’ willingness to apply for benefits for their children. Providing good information and referral services was essential to the engagement of undocumented Mexican mothers, emphasizing the need for the social work profession to revalue the brokering function (Russell & White, 2001) and its pretherapeutic casework roots in “urban mediation” (Katz, 1996, p. 172).

Social workers in agencies that serve undocumented families can translate their knowledge of mothers’ unique social location into advocacy that is aimed at building better relationships between policy makers and individuals who are targeted by specific policies (Murphy et al., 2009). Such advocacy may be at the local level to improve procedures for applying for benefits or at the state and federal levels to help shape immigration and social policies that affect families. Without the knowledge base derived from intersectional research and documentation, social policies will continue to marginalize undocumented immigrant women, their families, and the agencies that serve them.

Feminist standpoint and intersectional theory provide useful analytic tools in the current social welfare and immigration policy climate. By illuminating the unique and overlapping standpoints of marginalized actors, critical feminist theory challenges the basis of unequal power relations (Edmonds-Caty, 2009) and can lead to the development of just social policies. Given that social justice is a core value of the social work profession, more robust analytical tools are needed to challenge the status quo and create political coalitions. By considering undocumented Mexican mothers’ policy standpoints, social workers can lay the groundwork for the development of more effective and humane policy decisions.

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