

# A cultural lens on Yucatec Maya families' COVID-19 experiences

Lucía Alcalá<sup>1</sup>  | Suzanne Gaskins<sup>2</sup>  | Lindsey E. Richland<sup>3</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>California State University, Fullerton, Fullerton, California, USA

<sup>2</sup>Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago, Illinois, USA

<sup>3</sup>University of California, Irvine, Irvine, California, USA

## Correspondence

Lucía Alcalá, California State University, Fullerton, P.O. Box 34080, Fullerton CA 9283409480, USA.

Email: lualcala@fullerton.edu

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## Abstract

Health guidance during the COVID-19 pandemic led families around the world to spend more time isolated together, disrupting leisure activities, schooling, social interactions, and family work (UNICEF, 2021). Using the lens of Yucatec Maya families' cultural values and practices, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 Yucatec Maya rural women in Mexico ( $M_{\text{age}} = 32$ ; and for comparison, 13 middle-class European-American women ( $M_{\text{age}} = 41$ )), with children 6–7 years old, to analyze families' experiences during the pandemic. Faced with the same isolation as in the United States, our exploratory analysis revealed Maya families experienced external stresses but at the same time were generally comfortable with their children's everyday activities and their social-emotional well-being, illuminating consequences of the communities' cultural theories about development.

All children grow up in an environment structured by cultural beliefs and practices (Lancy, 2014; Montgomery, 2008; Rogoff, 2003). While it may be obvious that *other* children experience cultural influences on their development and learning (and it is all too easy to judge those influences as being inadequate or misinformed; Rogoff et al., 2017), it is often invisible that one's own children are likewise shaped by their cultural environment. Comparing common experiences across cultures can be an opportunity to identify characteristics of the culture one is embedded in. Furthermore, moments of disruption, such as by the vast changes instituted by communities responding to the health threats of the COVID-19 pandemic, can provide theoretical opportunities, sometimes naturalistic experiments, that help make visible cultural understandings and expectations that under normal circumstances remain invisible and unexamined.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to substantial changes in families' routines all over the world, often creating social isolation, disruption of children's education, missed significant life events, economic uncertainty, or concerns

about well-being and health (Human Rights Watch, 2020; Patrick et al., 2020; Prime et al., 2020; UNICEF, 2021). One might assume that many of the challenges and stresses families face in one community are natural outcomes of the health context and therefore have been universally experienced. However, as families reorganized their daily lives during the pandemic, the felt demands on parents and their children provide insight into how their everyday experiences are fundamentally shaped by both the cultural beliefs and daily practices of their community, and available external resources. While economic and social privilege may have protected many middle-class families from some pandemic challenges, culturally organized family systems theoretically could provide a different layer of protection, even in less privileged communities. Looking closely at the daily experiences of families during the pandemic in a cultural system very different from the middle-class European-American system that is well documented by researchers (Henrich et al., 2010) can elucidate ways in which cultural systems organize parents' roles and everyday practices

**Abbreviations:** EA, European American; M, mean; YM, Yucatec Maya.

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for supporting their children's lives (Henrich et al., 2010; Rogoff et al., 2018). These experiences also reveal specifically what resources or stress points a particular cultural system provides in a pandemic.

A traditional rural Yucatec Maya community in Mexico was chosen as the focus for this study because of the existence of a decades-long ethnographic record of children's lives which has revealed extensive evidence that the organization of their everyday activities and their roles in family life are quite different from those in traditional European-American families. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with mothers from this community about their children's activities and their own thoughts and concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic. To provide perspective on this novel moment, the responses of a small sample of European-American mothers to the same interview will also be presented, as well as some national data from other sources.

While there are of course many aspects of children's and families' lives that differ across these settings, we focus on three domains of the Yucatec Maya cultural framework characterizing children's roles in family life (Gaskins, 2020). Gaskins (2020) has recently synthesized the ethnographic record on Yucatec Maya families to posit core domains that ordinarily organize Yucatec Maya children's lives: *children's autonomy*, *belonging*, and *family work* (also see Alcalá et al., 2014, 2018, 2021; Coppens et al., 2016; Cervera, 2016; Gaskins, 1999, 2000, 2006, 2014b). While in fact these three domains are integrated into a unified childhood experience, they are helpful analytical tools to allow us to articulate cultural differences in the ground rules of family life. These domains also have potential implications for distress and resilience in the context of a severe stressor such as the pandemic.

In the next section, the Yucatec Maya cultural understandings about these three domains as evidenced prior to the pandemic will be briefly described, contrasting this cultural framework with a middle-class American one. More detail is available in the resources cited and in the online resources for this article. Next, we report the interview results categorized into these core domains.

## Autonomy

Autonomy is the first domain growing out of a cultural framework of beliefs about children, capturing cultural practices surrounding children's role and level of autonomy in organizing and motivating their everyday activities, including play, schoolwork, and household work. Maya children, in several communities in Guatemala and Mexico, have consistently been described as being in charge of organizing most of their own activities and managing their agenda, and this autonomy is explicitly valued and respected by parents (Cervera, 2016; Coppens et al., 2016; Gaskins, 1999, 2020). Children are largely left

to decide what they do with their time, beginning as infants (Gaskins, 1990). Caregivers adopt a largely responsive stance toward supporting the children's efforts to engage in the world (in contrast to a stimulating stance), but they also guard them against danger. As autonomous actors, children are given primary responsibility for their own informal learning (Gaskins, 2016; Paradise, 1994; Rogoff, 2003). They are expected to identify what they want to learn and motivate their own learning and mastery of skills through careful observation of ongoing activities and independent practice (Correa-Chávez & Rogoff, 2009; Correa-Chávez et al., 2015; Gaskins & Paradise, 2010).

Autonomy in middle-class European American families tends to adhere to different expectations and roles. There is an ambiguous cultural narrative valuing children's independence and self-reliance at the same time rewarding seeking help and attention (Whiting, 1978). Ochs and Kremer-Sadlki (2015) highlight the nature and challenges of middle-class households, with processes of managing children's behavior being a central challenge of frequent concern (also see Daly, 1996; Darrah et al., 2007; Rogoff, 2003). In Ochs and Kremer-Sadlki's observations, children were rarely asked to observe and learn from the everyday home context. Rather, parents invested high amounts of time and economic resources into meeting children's perceived interests and needs. Coordinating activities and these multiple goals took high discursive, time, and economic investments. These findings align with other studies revealing that children in middle-class communities in the U.S. lean on adults to plan and structure activities related to school and leisure (e.g., Lareau, 2000) and to provide positive feedback to motivate children (e.g., Miller & Cho, 2018). Thus, this approach to organizing children's time is highly effortful for parents and tend to lead children to seek attention and guidance on an ongoing basis.

## Belonging

Belonging is the second domain that centers on who children's primary social partners are and the qualities of those relationships (Gaskins, 2020). Yucatec Maya children's social worlds consist primarily of extended family members (Gaskins, 2006), and they are embedded from morning to night in a hierarchy of family social responsibility (Lucy & Gaskins, 1986). They regularly will be cared for by older siblings in addition to parents, and they in turn share responsibility to care for younger ones. Except when working with or observing a parent or other adult, children spend most of their time at home in groups of mixed-age siblings and other close child relatives (Gaskins, 2006, 2014a). Thus, their primary social partners are at home and consistent over time, and there are few significant social interactions that are not embedded in the social obligations and rights that

come with belonging to a family. That pattern remains throughout adulthood (Gaskins, 2006, 2020).

In contrast, for middle-class U.S. children, many of their social interactions are centered on same-aged peers (Whiting & Edwards, 1988), and they may have an adversarial and minimally collaborative relationship with their siblings (Alcalá et al., 2018; Lareau, 2000). Acceptance by peers and the development of deep friendships have long been thought by Western psychologists to be intrinsic needs of both children and adults (e.g., Sullivan, 1953), leading to a sense of self-validation. Children may also choose to modify their behaviors (and their values) to conform to peer group norms in order to maintain a position within the group (Hartup, 1992). Corsaro (2018) argues that a major change in children's lives happens when they move beyond the family into a shared world of peer cultural routines in face-to-face environments like schools, where children interpret and reinterpret their experiences and develop emotional attachments to other children (friends) through shared activities. Thus, for middle-class U.S. children, friends are theorized as central to children's social worlds and a major factor in their social development.

## Family work

Family Work is the third domain that focuses on what contributions children make to household work and how parents coordinate family work with their children. Yucatec Maya children, like children in many indigenous and indigenous-heritage communities of the Americas, are fully integrated as participants in shared activities, including household work and community celebrations (Alonqueo et al., 2020; Bolin, 2006; Corona Caraveo, 2011; Gaskins, 1999; Rogoff et al., 2010). As children become more competent, they contribute extensively to household work (Gaskins, 2000, 2014b; Paradise & de Haan, 2009). In addition to being expected to work when asked, children often volunteer to do chores they recognize as needing to be done (Alcalá et al., 2014; Gaskins, 2000; Mejía-Arauz et al., 2015). This “pitching in” (Rogoff, 2014) or being “acomodida/o” (Alcalá et al., 2018; López et al., 2015) is more frequent as children get older, because they come to understand the pressures their caretakers are under and begin to feel their own obligations to contribute to family needs (Gaskins, 2000; Jiménez-Balam et al., 2019). Contributing to family work helps them feel both competent and connected (Gaskins, 2020).

In contrast, in middle-class U.S. communities, children typically focus on individual activities and are often separated from adult ones (Lareau, 2000); their contributions to the household are characterized as “chores,” and they often need to be persuaded to do them (Alcalá et al., 2018; Goodnow & Delaney,

1989; Klein & Goodwin, 2013; Ochs, 2013; Ochs & Izquierdo, 2009), even when those chores are focused on contributing to their own needs rather than benefiting the family at large (e.g., putting one's shoes away). Parents often do household work when young children are otherwise occupied or asleep because they do not expect children's help and find it easier to do chores when they are not interrupted by children's requests (Coppens, 2015).

## The present study

This project examines the relationships between these three core domains—referred to in this study as *autonomy, belonging, and family work*—and perceived disruptions, stressors, and coping in Yucatec Maya families following the COVID-19 pandemic and stay-at-home recommendations. We examine mothers' reports of their families' reactions when their ground rules of everyday activity changed, providing insight into their cultural framework of children's development and their everyday activities characterized by the three domains described above. Like families around the world, Maya families have had to stay home much more than usual, disrupting normal activities outside the home, including work and school. Based on the known characteristics of Yucatec Maya families' cultural framework, including the domains of autonomy, belonging, and family work, we theorized that the impact of COVID-19 would not activate the same stresses and concerns widely reported in European-American communities (and prevalent even in those families without serious economic repercussions of the pandemic; Patrick et al., 2020).

The following analysis of interviews with parents from the Maya community explores mothers' reports of the experiences of their children and families during the pandemic to identify challenges and stresses they represent themselves as having faced (or not faced), and to explore whether their experiences aligned with the three previously identified domains that emerge from their cultural framework. These experiences will be contrasted with a range of evidence from middle-class European-American families in the United States, including the same interview protocols with a small sample of mothers, to explore whether the reported Maya responses to the stresses caused by the pandemic were indeed different in ways that would be predicted from their culturally organized socialization practices that privilege autonomy, belonging, and work. The (perhaps unexpected) potential for the culturally organized practices of families in this Maya community to provide both adults and children with coping strengths and resilience to extreme adverse situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic will be evaluated in the conclusion.

## METHODS

### Study site context

#### The community

The Yucatec Maya community studied here is a traditional, rural village with about 2000 residents, located an hour away by car to the nearest city. The residents of the community all identify as being culturally Maya, and Yucatec Maya is the primary language of most residents, including all the mothers interviewed in this study, although many adults also speak Spanish. There are local shops and services run out of private homes, a rural health clinic, a colonial Catholic church, several Protestant temples, and four public schools (preschool, primary, secondary, and high school).

The village is located in the “milpa zone” of the state of Yucatán, México; traditionally, the primary economic activity was making milpa (slash-and-burn farming of corn, beans, and squash for personal consumption). During the last 30–40 years, the economy has transitioned to being primarily a cash economy (Gaskins, 2003), as an increasing number of residents go to the Caribbean coast of the neighboring state of Quintana Roo, either to work for wages in construction and tourist services or to sell products there from small-scale agriculture endeavors. With this income, families’ financial health is typically less dependent on the success of annual crops, which historically were very unpredictable. At the same time, household work is demanding, with labor including food preparation, garden and livestock tending, laundry, childcare, house and yard maintenance, and errands within the village and in town. Most men (at home or away at work) and women work steadily all day, and there is always more to do. Children of all ages regularly help with household work, both because it is expected and because they want to contribute (Gaskins, 2003).

Adults’ and children’s social lives are primarily oriented toward relatives (Gaskins, 2006). Household compounds tend to consist of two- or three-generation families. Relatives often live nearby and visit daily. Houses range from traditional wooden oval huts with thatch roofs to two-story cement block houses with several rooms. Women usually begin married life by entering into the family compound of their husband, but close ties are also maintained with the wife’s family. Significant social events, many of which are religious, are organized around family relations. Public business (political, religious, or educational) is conducted in a context of interwoven families across the community, leading all adults to be acquainted with one another. Anyone from outside the village is immediately recognized and treated with respectful distance.

### Pandemic effects on Yucatec Maya communities

According to the World Health Organization, the number of identified COVID-19 cases in Yucatan, Mexico during the time of the interviews was approximately 1 in 60, and those were concentrated in the capital of Mérida. By comparison, the count of cases in Southern California at the same time was 1 in 12 (New York Times, 2021). There were no national governmental policies implemented in response to the pandemic in Mexico. The state government provided only limited health and food resources to rural villages. Masks, antibacterial gel, and soap were included in two distributions of food to this village. There was also one food distribution conducted through the primary school’s government agency, and three food distributions organized by private donors.

During the first year of the pandemic (March 2020–March 2021), there were only two known COVID cases in the village, with no community spread. Within compounds, much time is spent outside or in homes that have a lot of open air, which has likely helped mitigate any illness present. Otherwise, the primary protection available to the community was the months-long physical closure of the town by blocking local roads, limiting access to the community as well as preventing community members from leaving the village in search of income in the nearby tourist zone or market city. At the time the interviews were conducted there was also a nightly curfew in the village. Thus, the health risks and local base rates of infection were not high during this time, so any parental responses to the pandemic identified in these data can be attributed to the structural changes in families’ lives rather than to health impacts themselves.

### Participants

Yucatec Maya participants included 21 mothers from the village in Yucatán, México. They were recruited by a local teacher, who also served as an informant about how COVID-19 was affecting the community and how mothers were dealing with the changes imposed by the pandemic. The teacher invited 23 mothers with children ages 6–7 years of age to participate in phone interviews with the first author, out of approximately 100 mothers in the village with children in the target age range. All the mothers who were invited agreed to participate but we were unable to schedule the interviews with two mothers. Three participants were excluded from analysis; one of the mothers preferred to answer in Maya rather than Spanish, one had a child with a developmental disability, and the third was a single mother, which is not common in the community.

Of the 18 Yucatec Maya mothers retained in the sample, their mean age was 32 and they had, a mean of 7.8 years of schooling, ranging from third to ninth grade.



All the mothers spoke Yucatec Maya as their first language but also spoke Spanish, and they represented a range of financial security. The mean household size was 4.5 people, and four of the households included extended family members. The sample of target children (10 girls) included 12 first graders, 5-second graders, and one-third grader, with a mean age of 6.3 years. None of the mothers worked outside the home at a salaried job prior to the pandemic, but 12 of them had had some source of income. Additional information about employment is in the demographic Supporting Information.

## Procedure

Semi-structured interviews with mothers were conducted to examine the impact of the pandemic on children's daily activities, providing comparable data from all of the mothers but also allowing mothers to volunteer additional information important to them. The complete interview protocol is included in Supporting Information.

The first author conducted virtual interviews in Spanish for the Maya participants (during the fall of 2020). It is possible that interviewees could have adjusted their responses being mindful of the researchers' interests or concerns of those who could overhear the interviews, but this seems unlikely based on the richness of the data and their willingness to share sensitive experiences. Interviews ranged from 30 to 90 min and averaged approximately 45 min. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded in their original language. Quotations from the Maya mothers were translated into English for this report.

## Analysis

Our exploratory analysis integrates a quantitative standardized coding system, reliable across multiple coders to facilitate comparisons across communities, with additional qualitative analysis of mothers' open-ended responses. This multi-method approach provides a better understanding of the complexity of the changes and challenges faced by these two communities than either could on its own (Gaskins, 1994; Hay, 2016; Rogoff & Angelillo, 2002). The research questions were intentionally grounded in the ethnography of the Maya community, and the mothers' extended descriptions added details about the culturally organized values and opinions that could not be represented fully in the coding system designed for systematic comparison.

The quantitative coding system was devised to assess what mothers reported as changes in families' activities, children's *autonomy* in their daily lives and in their schoolwork, their *belonging* within the family and outside the family, and their participation in *family work*, as well as what had been challenging and positive in their

lives. The full coding system is available in Supporting Information. Inter-coder reliability was calculated with 32% of the data, based on 10 interviews (from both Maya and U.S. mothers) with eight major coding categories, each with multiple sub-categories, for a total of 55 responses per informant. This is a standard approach in qualitative research (McDonald et al., 2019). Inter-rater reliability was calculated based on percent agreement for each category across participants and ranged from 80% to 92%. Inconsistencies in the coding were discussed among the coding team, clarifying the coding system, and disagreements were resolved by consensus. The rest of the interviews were then coded individually, but in regular consultation with team members, ensuring coding fidelity.

## RESULTS

### Maya experiences during the pandemic

The analysis of the Yucatec Maya mothers' responses to our interview questions are grouped in the three theorized domains of autonomy, belonging, and work, plus their own characterizations of their difficulties and positive experiences.

### Autonomy

#### *Autonomy in everyday activities*

Interview data were first analyzed for instances where parents indicated who decided what their children would do on a daily basis and who their child would spend time with during unstructured time. As predicted based on the ethnographic record, most of the Yucatec Maya mothers (78%) indicated that their child typically decided what they wanted to do and who they wanted to do it with, including deciding who they want to play with and when, without consulting with their parents. One participant reported,

Yes, she decides by herself who to play with, which children she wants to play with, and so she does it. [YM05]

In addition, the majority of mothers (67%) reported that one of the activities that children chose to do was to contribute to the family work—that is, they would volunteer to do chores. These responses were indicative of high child autonomy in unstructured time and decision making.

#### *Autonomy in school activities at home*

Prior to the pandemic, children in the community attended school Monday through Friday from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. At the time of the interviews, the children were doing assignments sent to them at home via WhatsApp.

Thus, the timing of school activities was flexible and determined by household. The children's schoolwork was incorporated as one of the many daily activities conducted in a shared space.

Well, there is no place where we say it would just be for [schoolwork]. When it's time to do assignments, we adjust everything and then he has a space there free to do his work. [YM05]

Most (67%) of the Yucatec Maya children reported that their children did their assignments essentially on their own, with no teacher or parental support. First-graders needed the most help understanding their homework. Some Maya mothers (39%) reported that their children were responsible for deciding when to do their schoolwork and setting up their work space, and even more (56%) said their children were responsible for putting away their school materials.

## Belonging

Many of the Yucatec Maya mothers (67%) reported that during the pandemic, siblings and extended family members were their children's primary social partners, as had been common before the pandemic (see Gaskins, 2006).

Just here in the house, they play in the patio of my house. I don't allow them to go out and play with their little friends. Little friends, no. Now they play just in the house. [YM03]

Four mothers (27%) stated that their children also played with friends and neighbors (somewhat common before the pandemic), two (11%) said that they played with their parents (uncommon before). No mothers mentioned extracurricular activities (also uncommon before).

So, although they were staying home because of the pandemic, most children had access to many of their usual playmates, and their social worlds did not appear to be fundamentally disorganized. Most Yucatecan Maya mothers did not express concerns about their children's social lives. Only 11% of the mothers said that the family was spending more time together (since they already spent a lot of time together before the pandemic). Five mothers (28%) mentioned that their children's social opportunities were reduced because they were not going to school and were not able to play with their school friends. Three mothers (17%) reported some sibling conflict. One mother (6%) felt responsibility for supporting her child's social interactions, and two (11%) were concerned about how their children's social isolation might affect their mental well-being. A third of the mothers (33%) volunteered that they were not concerned about their children's social development.

## Family work

As Yucatec Maya families spent more time together at home during the pandemic, adult work responsibilities increased, because of monitoring and supporting schoolwork and having children home all day. In our sample, 28% of the Yucatec Maya mothers felt they needed more help with their increased workload. The rest felt that, although their work had increased, they were getting the help they needed from the other family members.

Before the pandemic, Yucatec Maya children were already participating actively in family work, even though school took children away from home for 8 h a day. For example, Gaskins (2000) found that children ages 6–8 spent 34.8% of their time at home working, and about a quarter of that time was doing work they had volunteered to do.

In this study, six mothers (33%) stressed that schoolwork should take precedence over household work even during the pandemic. At the same time, mothers recognized the benefits of having the children home all day. For example, 10 mothers (56%) reported their children were helping more or learning new skills because, being home all day, they could observe more about how the household functions. Additionally, mothers also reported that older kids were also learning more by spending more time at home during the pandemic, like 10- and 12-year-old sibling girls learning to make tortillas [YM03], or a son learning to plant in the garden [YM14]. These older children were also helping around the house more, the mothers said, because being home all day, they see better what needs to be done [YM19, YM09].

Reflecting the fact that in general children organize their own time, two-thirds (67%) of the mothers reported that their children often helped with family work on their own initiative, both because they wanted to learn and because they wanted to be helpful.

When the sun comes up, at 6:30 in the morning, he is already awake and says, 'Open the door, Mom, I have to go let the chickens out to help them grow'. ...He grabs the food and begins to give it to the littlest chickens. I don't have to tell him things. He does it quickly all by himself, he runs to do them without being told. Before I wake up, he's awake. [YM13]

Some mothers added the caveats that their children helped only when they wanted to help and if they did not have homework. Only 17% reported having to ask directly for their children's help. None of the mothers reported that it was more difficult to get their children to help during the pandemic.

Children helped with a variety of family work. On average, mothers listed 3.11 distinct tasks that these young

children regularly did as a contribution to family household work. The chores their 6- to 7-year-old children did included sweeping, washing dishes, running errands, washing clothes, folding laundry, picking up trash, caretaking younger siblings, weeding, tending livestock, and helping in the milpa. Only three (17%) of the mothers mentioned self-care tasks, for a total of five tasks for the entire sample of 18 children. Ethnographic observations of children this age (Gaskins, 2000) have shown that they are very self-sufficient, so it is likely that mothers assumed that their 6- to 7-year-old children would take care of many of their own needs and did not consider such activities as “work.”

## Challenges and resources

In the open-ended questions about their experiences during the pandemic, Yucatec Maya mothers explained what difficulties were introduced by the pandemic. Their responses may add up to more than 100% because some mothers volunteered more than one answer.

### *Job loss and poverty*

When asked to explain the biggest challenges they had faced during the pandemic, 61% of the Yucatec Maya mothers mentioned the lack of money and not being able to provide food for their children. Families had few financial reserves before the pandemic, and their informal and interdependent economy came to a halt at the outbreak of the pandemic. All the Maya mothers reported either a complete loss of income or a severe reduction in economic resources because of the pandemic, and almost half of them (44%) reported that there had been times when they did not have enough food to feed their family, nor buy soap or antibacterial gel to protect their families from the virus. None of them, however, were facing eviction or homelessness because they all owned their own homes, basic as they were.

### *Schooling responsibilities*

The next most common concern mentioned by 39% of the Yucatec Maya mothers, was having the resources (both knowledge and money) to be able to support their children's schooling. Mothers felt inadequately prepared to tutor their children in the absence of teachers, and they had far fewer financial resources yet more school expenses. Despite the school's decision to rely on cell phone data as the simplest and cheapest mode of communication with families, with so many people out of work, finding extra money to support their children's schooling was almost impossible. They worried that their children's schooling would suffer because they could not afford the extra costs.

### *Fear of pandemic*

Three Yucatec Maya mothers (17%) were directly concerned about family members getting sick from

COVID-19. In general, however, the mothers felt the isolation measures put in place protected their village. Indeed, only 2 cases of COVID-19 have been identified in the community (both men who worked in Cancun), and those infections did not spread in the community.

### *Parenting stress and accommodations*

No Yucatec Maya mothers raised parenting stress and burnout as a major issue for them, despite their children being home all day and their workload increased. Instead, mothers noted that having their children at home during this crisis made them feel comfortable because they knew that their children were safe at home. Only five mothers (28%) reported stress based on the parental demand of having to support children's social interactions at home, and three of these five (16%) reported that their general level of stress was caused by the financial hardships of the pandemic had impacted their parenting styles. Two mothers (11%) expressed worrying about their children's mental well-being. Mothers' strategies to reduce stress included spending time working in their backyard or going to their corn fields or community garden plots.

Likewise, no mother reported that family routines had to be reorganized around the children. In fact, when parents' work responsibilities increased, the children accepted the additional responsibilities to take care of themselves, as stated by one participant:

Well, for now, I have to help my husband more, we have to grow more food in place of buying it, because he doesn't have much work ... When I wake up, I make breakfast for my girls. When they have eaten, I tell them to wash the dishes. Later, they move on to their assignments, reading so they learn a little more. When I return, I see what they haven't done and I help them both, and I help the little one a little more. [YM03]

### *Support for mothers*

In their open-ended responses, Yucatec Maya mothers reported receiving some support from the government, but more from family and friends (who themselves were also financially stressed). Most Yucatec Maya mothers (89%) reported having received some minimal level of government support, in the form of food, school supplies, and uniforms. All but one of the Yucatec Maya mothers reported that they relied on family and a few (15%) of the Yucatec Maya reported that they also relied on neighbors.

### *Challenges for children*

The overwhelming challenge (67%) Yucatec Maya mothers spontaneously identified for their children was their diminished learning opportunities because of no teacher contact. They frequently mentioned that they were not teachers and were not prepared to teach their children.

TABLE 1 Children's autonomy

Cultural group	Child decides activities	Child volunteers to work	Child does schoolwork on own	Child seeks parental help
Yucatec Maya	78%	67%	67%	33%
U.S. middle-class EA	15%	31%	N/A (teacher present)	23% (in addition to teacher)

I believe it's going to affect them because it's not the same having us, the mamas having to teach the school. I mean, the teachers are, well, teachers, no? They know how to teach the kids, and we only know a little about what we are trying to have them learn. [YM12]

This reflects the cultural understanding that formal instruction falls within the purview of the school, not the home. Five mothers (28%) reported that boredom was a challenge for their children. Four mothers (22%) reported their children missed social interactions outside the home. One reported that their children were missing out on major family events and milestones (in this case religious services). And two mothers (11%) did not identify any concerns at all regarding their children.

### Providing perspective on the Yucatec Maya experience with COVID-19

As discussed in the introduction, the cultural commitments demonstrated in Yucatec Maya families to children's autonomy, belonging, and family work are not necessarily universal, and indeed previous work has suggested are not commonly represented in the middle-class European American families in the United States. For this reason, in this section, to provide some initial comparative perspective on the Maya pandemic experience in relation to these domains, results on a small sample of U.S. families using the same interview are reported, along with references to some national surveys and studies done in the U.S. looking at employment, schooling, and family coping during the pandemic.

A sample of 13 middle-class European-American mothers was recruited from three sources in Southern California: An existing database from a local university, via the Parent Teacher Association boards of two local elementary schools, and referrals from other mothers in the study. A total of 37 families were contacted to produce the current sample of 13. As with the Yucatec Maya mothers, interviews were conducted in the fall of 2020. The U.S. mothers' mean age was 41, with a mean of 18.9 years of schooling. The mean household size was 4.4 people, and only one household included extended family members. The sample of 13 target children (nine girls) included five first graders, five second graders, and three third graders, with a mean age of 7.23 years. Of the

13 mothers, 10 had a source of income outside the home prior to the pandemic. Seven were professionals, three worked in sales, and three were stay-at-home moms. Of the 10 who worked before the pandemic, seven were currently working from home and two lost their sales businesses. All fathers were employed at the time of the interview, 10 professionals.

For each topic analyzed for the Yucatec Maya, a brief summary table of interview results will be given, followed by a discussion of differences. For most topics, the differences between the two groups are quite large and even with minimal data, reveal that the families in the two cultures had very different resources for coping with the same demands of isolation during the pandemic.

### Autonomy

As shown in Table 1, there are big differences across the two communities in mothers' reports about children showing autonomy in their daily activities.

#### *Autonomy in everyday activities*

Because middle-class U.S. children have much of their time organized by their parents (Coppens et al., 2016; Lareau, 2000), it was expected that many fewer U.S. mothers would report in their interviews that their children made most of the decisions about what they did and who they did it with. Their responses followed the predicted patterns. Only two of the 13 mothers (15%) reported that their children decided what to do and who to do it with. Slightly more, (31%), reported that their children sometimes volunteered to do chores. This meant that mothers were instead managing their children's time and at-home activities (discussed in more detail below).

#### *Autonomy in school activities at home*

In contrast to the Yucatec Maya children, who received assignments to do on their own, school for all the U.S. children whose mothers were interviewed was done in day-long virtual classrooms, and the times children were expected to be in school were fixed by the school and inflexible. This arrangement represents many U.S. children's schooling experiences, though these varied widely by district. In a nationwide survey (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021), 45.7% of students were in virtual classrooms and another 23.4% had combined virtual and in-person schooling. The rest were in classrooms.



**TABLE 2** Belonging: children's social lives

Cultural group	Children's social life limited	Family spends more time together	Plays w/siblings/relatives	Plays w/parents	Plays w/other children	Extra-curriculars
Yucatec Maya	17%	11%	67%	11%	28%	0%
U.S. middle-class EA	92%	62%	38%	62%	46%	69%

The structure of their schooling left little room for children's autonomy since there was always a teacher in charge. Both the school and the parents assumed that children needed a private space for schoolwork, an internet connection, and a computer or tablet to log in to the virtual classroom. For three mothers (23%), reorganizing their home space and schedule to accommodate everyone now working and doing school at home had created additional stress. Three mothers reported that their children's school day was more stressful for their child than the regular classroom. The children had to get used to the virtual classroom and coordinating their school time and home time had to be coordinated in a single setting, and being on Zoom calls all day long alone could be overwhelming.

Given such different systems of schooling, it is not possible to compare the children's autonomy in doing their schoolwork across the two samples. But the fact that school was a virtual formal classroom in the U.S. can be seen as a reflection of a shared cultural understanding that children need a structured setting managed by a teacher in order to learn. In addition, it reflects the fact that the school system and the families have the resources to support virtual classrooms. Likewise, the expectation that Yucatec Maya children were able to do their assignments independently with no external structure is also a reflection of a shared cultural belief about how learning needs to be organized, and receiving their assignments through WhatsApp indicates the different level of available technological resources.

In addition to teacher-led instruction, the children received help with schoolwork from resources outside of school, as did the Maya children. Mothers of three U.S. children (23%) reported needing to directly help their children with their lessons (in addition to the teacher who was present). Almost all of the children received additional help from their parents (92%), as well as help from extended family (15%) and individual help from the teacher (23%); these resources were also used by the Maya children. In addition, some U.S. parents hired tutors (23%), while Maya children got help from their older siblings (16%) and extended family members (38%).

Overall, Yucatec Maya children were characterized in their mothers' interviews as being in charge of most of their activities during the day, including leisure activities, completing school assignments, and household work. In contrast, the U.S. children appeared to rely much more on their mothers and their teachers to structure their activities. Their dependence on adults included having

parents organize and participate in their children's social interactions (see below).

## Belonging

As shown in Table 2, for European-American children in the United States, the pandemic had significantly affected children's social lives, both by limiting their interaction with peers and increasing their interaction with family members. Mothers reported that their children's primary social partners normally are same-age peers from school and extracurricular activities, and all but one mother (92%) reported that these social interactions had been limited drastically. Eight mothers (62%) reported that their family was spending more time together. The same number (62%) reported serving as playmates, and a little over a third of the mothers reported that their children (38%) were playing with siblings or other relatives. One parent (8%) reported that the siblings had developed a stronger bond during the pandemic, while four (31%) reported more sibling conflict.

U.S. mothers were also working to give their children the kinds of social opportunities they were used to. About half (46%) were still having play dates with friends, and about two-thirds (69%) were still participating in extracurricular activities. Three (23%) indicated that children were learning to use different technologies to stay connected with their friends (e.g., video phone calls and playing virtual videogames). Most of the mothers (62%) reported an increase in stress due to parental demand in having to organize and support these interactions outside the family.

For these middle-class European-American children, unlike the Yucatec Maya children whose family-centered social environment held steady, the pandemic has created a social environment that included loss of access to their friends and peers at school, in extracurricular activities, and through playdates. Being at home with siblings was not described to be an adequate substitute.

## Family work

Like their counterparts in the Yucatan, the European-American mothers that we interviewed, all reported that their children contributed to the household work (see Table 3). But 54% of the U.S. mothers felt that they needed more help with their increased workload.

TABLE 3 Children's engagement in family work

Cultural group	Children contribute	Mothers need more help	Child help had increased	Child helps voluntarily	Child needs to be asked	Harder to get child to help	# of tasks family work
Yucatec Maya	100%	28%	56%	67%	17%	0%	3.11
U.S. middle-class EA	100%	54%	38%	31%	31%	23%	1.62

Importantly, even though a majority felt they needed more help, only about a third of the mothers (38%) reported that the amount of work their child did had increased or that they had learned how to do something new since the pandemic began. Four parents (31%) reported that their children would help voluntarily, often for regular, assigned daily chores. Another four parents (31%) reported that they often had to directly ask their children to help, and three of those (23%) explicitly stated it had become more of a struggle getting children to do chores than before the pandemic.

In contrast to the Yucatec Maya mothers, the European-American mothers reported almost as many self-care tasks (average 1.31 per child), as family work chores (average 1.62 per child). Self-care tasks included clearing their plate, picking up their toys, putting away their clean laundry, picking up their shoes, and practicing the piano. Examples of family work include emptying the dishwasher, taking the trash out, and picking up after the dog. Unlike the Yucatec Maya mothers, the U.S. mothers interpreted self-care tasks as work. None of the U.S. middle-class mothers offered an analysis of under what conditions their children would volunteer to do chores, as the Yucatec Maya mothers did.

While the numbers suggest that Yucatec Maya children are doing more work at home than the U.S. children, we suspect that the numbers do not fully address the qualitative differences between the two groups. The specific examples of work given by the mothers in both groups help demonstrate that Yucatec Maya children are regularly making significant contributions to family work, and that their contributions are responsive to what needs to be done, while U.S. children are more likely to have limited, fixed chores they are expected to do regularly. In addition, the examples given suggest that the time spent in work, the difficulty of the work, and their sense of responsibility to help is not as great as for the Maya children. Most Maya mothers in general felt like they were receiving enough help, that their children's contributions (and skills) had increased during the pandemic, and that their children were asking to help more. Most U.S. mothers felt they needed more help and some felt getting their children's help had become harder, not easier.

## Challenges and resources

### *Challenges for mothers*

For the Yucatec Maya mothers, financial and schooling concerns were the most frequently listed. In contrast,

neither was given as a significant concern by the U.S. middle-class mothers. Likewise, the U.S. mothers reported worrying about things that did not trouble the Yucatec Maya mothers (see Table 4). Their primary concern was for their child's social and emotional well-being (62%). They mentioned signs of anxiety, nervousness, anger depression, sibling fighting, and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. One mother had taken her child to a psychologist because she was so concerned. From our data, it is impossible to distinguish between the existence of more serious threats to child mental health well-being and amplified parental concern. Since more of U.S. children's everyday activities were disturbed by the pandemic than the Yucatec Maya children's, it is very possible that U.S. children were experiencing more distress. But it may also be the case that U.S. mothers felt a greater sense of responsibility for their children's social and emotional well-being than the Yucatec Maya mothers did, which translated into greater worry about their children's mental health.

Many U.S. mothers also reported their own negative impact of the additional parenting stresses (46%), specifically mentioning the ever-present responsibility of managing their children's schedules, entertaining children all day, supervising and motivating school-work, and balancing work and childcare. Interestingly, like the Yucatec Maya, the health challenges of the pandemic were not listed as a major source of concern by the U.S. mothers. Instead, the final concern mentioned by some mothers (31%) was that they would disappoint their children by having to deny them things they want. While Yucatec Maya parents also reported the difficulties of disappointing their children (largely by not being able to afford to buy what they asked for), they did not describe this as a parenting failure or express a fear of long-term consequences. In their examples, Yucatec Maya mothers expressed no discomfort with explaining to their children the realities of the pandemic and the consequences for their lives. The U.S. mothers were much more hesitant to burden their children with this knowledge. This aligns with approaches observed in non-pandemic times.

### *Support for mothers*

Only a few European-American participants (23%) mentioned having received government support, including one who received a stimulus check. This is in line with the result that most of these families did not feel significant financial strain. They did, however, feel the need for social support. Like the Maya, U.S. mothers (100%) reported that they relied on family support (see Table 5). In

TABLE 4 Mothers' challenges

Cultural group	Job loss/ poverty	School concerns	Pandemic fears	Concern for child's well-being	Concern for child's limited social interactions	parental stress	Parent burnout	Concern will disappoint children
Yucatec Maya	61%	39%	17%	11%	0%	28%	0%	0%
U.S. middle-class EA	0%	0%	11%	62%	69%	62%	46%	31%

TABLE 5 Mothers' support

Cultural group	Help from family	Help from friends, coworkers, neighbors
Yucatec Maya	93%	15%
U.S. middle-class EA	100%	61%

contrast to the Maya, many (61%) also relied on friends, neighbors, and coworkers. Since U.S. mothers reported more stress about caring for their children than the Yucatec Maya did, it is reasonable that they would seek outside support and also develop a range of strategies to deal with their stress. The U.S. mothers mentioned talking to friends and family members, engaging in self-care activities, working out, spending time in nature, and doing crafts. One participant mentioned drinking more, and one mentioned having a therapist.

*Challenges for children*

Both groups of mothers believed that the pandemic put their children at risk, but the nature of that risk was described very differently for the two groups. For the majority of U.S. mothers (77%) the most challenging aspect of the pandemic they saw for their children was the lack of social interaction: unable to socialize with classmates, and missing their interactions with friends (see Table 6). This was a minimal concern for Yucatec Maya mothers, since their children still had access to their primary social partners (siblings and other family members). Relatedly, almost as many U.S. mothers (62%) worried that the pandemic would impact their children's long-term social and emotional development, their social skills, or their healthy relationship building. A third significant challenge was children's boredom, mentioned by 46% of the U.S. mothers. A few U.S. mothers (23%) identified the biggest challenge for children as missing out on fun or significant activities (like vacations and community events). The biggest challenge for Maya mothers—their children being denied quality school learning—was given by only one (8%) U.S. mother. Overall, mothers' concerns for the well-being of their children were very different across the two communities thought both pertained to isolation practices: the Yucatec Maya mothers, with no access to teachers, worried about their children's learning; the U.S. mothers worried about their children's isolation from friends and activities.

**DISCUSSION**

This study examined the disruptions created by COVID-19 in Yucatec Maya families and how their normative cultural framework organized their responses. The children's autonomy and their initiative to be legitimate work participants within a family-focused social world meant that, although the pandemic led to social

TABLE 6 Challenges for children

Cultural group	School learning	Children's lack of social interaction	Social/emotional development at risk	Boredom	Missing major events	None
Yucatec Maya	67%	22%	0%	28%	5%	11%
U.S. middle-class EA	8%	77%	62%	46%	23%	0%

distance there was enough resilience in the family system to make the necessary adaptations to handle more time together, virtual schooling, and the additional outside pressures of lack of income and food. Importantly, children's social lives were not a source of concern for these mothers. Rather, mothers reported that they saw positive changes in their children, who sought to shoulder some of the new burdens themselves, by taking primary responsibility for their schoolwork and participating more in the growing burden of work in the home. Their responses provide insights into the nature of how cultural and community norms can provide support and resilience to unexpected changes such as social isolation requirements.

Even though this particular effect of the pandemic— isolation at home—was the same for the Yucatec Maya and U.S. middle-class families, available data indicate that middle-class European American families in the U.S. did focus on their children's social lives as a primary concern, and popular media as well as a small comparison sample indicate that mothers did not feel that their additional work around the home was reduced by children participating.

Mirroring the culturally organized patterns of everyday family life from before the pandemic, Yucatec Maya mothers reported that during the pandemic, their 6- and 7-year-old children largely took responsibility for organizing their own activities—including their schoolwork done at home; they remained embedded in their primary social world of the family and maintained their primary playmates, their siblings and other relatives; and they had meaningful things to do at home by actively contributing to family work. While the children missed going to school, they were mostly content and engaged at home; likewise, their parents were comfortable having them at home all day. During the pandemic, Maya children in this community maintained a sense of being responsible for their own activities, as well as belonging to and being a legitimate participant in the family group (Gaskins, 2020; Jiménez-Balam et al., 2019).

These patterns contrast sharply with those reported by middle-class U.S. mothers for their children, who faced far greater disruption in the patterns of their everyday family life because of the pandemic-imposed isolation. U.S. children's pre-pandemic lives were largely focused on the outside world, involving commitments to friends, school, and extra-curricular activities (Corsaro, 2018; Whiting & Edwards, 1988). Attending school online and missing their structured activities and extensive contacts with friends, these children relied heavily on

their parents to organize, monitor, and motivate their activities, and they sought more attention from them. Popular media during this period reflected a similar perceived phenomenon. For example, in one report married professors Edwards and Snyder (2020), systematically measured the interruptions from their 8- and 12-year-old daughters while everyone was working/studying from home. They found the time between interruptions, on average, was just 3½ min, providing corroborative evidence that many Euro-American children in the United States are not used to organizing their daily activities.

Mothers reported that all these changes caused their children significant distress (and parents significant concern about their well-being). Supporting their children under these unusual circumstances and trying to keep them happy was also stressful for the mothers. They reported that the children were often bored but not inclined to fill the void of activities by contributing to household work. Many of the pre-pandemic understandings of the U.S. mothers and children about the children's daily activities were violated or negated by the reality of the pandemic requiring their community to shut down and the new demands of being home together often exceeded their ability to adapt (Loades et al., 2020; Prime et al., 2020; Sprang & Silman, 2013).

Mothers in both communities reported increased stress for them and their children caused by the pandemic, but the sources of that stress differed. While the Yucatec Maya families in this study had cultural practices that supported their family life even while being in isolation together at home, they had fewer protections against external strains that centered on money and education (Bertely-Busquets, 2016). Yucatec Maya mothers were dealing with significant economic stress that made it hard to feed their families and threatened their ability to support their children's learning. They also felt ill-prepared to serve as tutors for their children. Even though there were no easy solutions, parents did their best to mitigate the impact of these problems on their children. They planted food to eat and stripped their diet down to the basics of beans and tortillas. They shared pre-paid cell phones and pooled resources with other mothers to receive and send lessons to the teacher through WhatsApp. They also called upon relatives and neighbors with more education to help explain children's lessons to them. Even in the face of such challenges, most did not describe the act of parenting during the pandemic as more difficult.

The U.S. middle-class parents in this sample did not face similar external problems. The mothers in our



middle-class sample were largely protected from both economic stress and primary responsibility for schooling, and they themselves had enough schooling to be able to help their children with their lessons when needed. Many families in the U.S. have faced significant economic hardship, but that burden has not been equally distributed across socioeconomic class. For example, Chen et al. (2021) report for one sample of families, more than 40% of families from low-income and lower-middle-class households had lost income, while only 13.3% of middle class and 12.1% of upper-middle class and high-income households had lost income.

However, the U.S. middle-class mothers did describe parenting under the constraints and demands of the pandemic as much more challenging. For them, many of their cultural principles about their family's daily life were violated when they had to isolate as a family at home. Their patterns of interaction within the home were seriously disrupted, causing stress and concern for their children's well-being. Chen et al. (2021) found a similar pattern. Respondents in upper-middle-class families reported more stress over maintaining or creating structure and routines for their children than those from low-income and lower-middle-class families, and both middle class and higher income families reported more stress over planning educational activities for their children at home than their low-income and lower-middle-class counterparts. (See also Loades et al., 2020; Sprang & Silman, 2013.)

### Study limitations

Given that this study took place during the pandemic, several limitations were encountered. The most significant limitation is the sample sizes of mothers interviewed in the two cultures. Recruiting participants was difficult, and the samples are unfortunately small. Under the circumstances, we felt fortunate to have any mothers agree to be interviewed. For the Yucatec Maya women, it was a highly unusual request to ask them to hold an intimate conversation about their families by phone with a foreigner in their second language. The trust they have in the teacher who recruited them is largely responsible for their willingness to do so. For the U.S. middle-class mothers, the solicitation for participation came at a time when their lives were already very difficult and they were very busy holding their families together, while (for some) trying to work at the same time.

Furthermore, because of the constraints of the pandemic, only one informant was interviewed per family; it was not possible to conduct ethnographic observations in the homes or interview other family members by phone or video-call. By design, the interviews focused on mothers' views of their children's daily activities, family dynamics, and perceived difficulties; these topics proved to be of great interest to the mothers and the

conversations were lengthy and rich with details. There was no additional space to explore other factors related to the women's understanding of COVID-19 and their explanatory models regarding the virus that were not central to the research question.

### Pandemic risk and cultural resilience

The pandemic has indeed been a stressor for all of the families studied, from both communities. But, as predicted, the particular problems, emotional strains, and fears regarding their children that parents expressed largely aligned with, and seemed to have grown out of, their cultural frameworks that organized their understandings about their children's needs, abilities, and family roles and the everyday family practices that grow out of those understandings. This study has highlighted the differences across two communities in their cultural frameworks, including values, attitudes, and practices that organize children's lives and that influence their development and their learning. While there was a single reality of the pandemic causing families to stay home together, responses were systematically different across the two communities discussed here, suggesting distinct cultural understandings and practices about children's lives.

Some of the risks and stressors encountered by the Maya families were outside these sociocultural domains of child rearing and socialization. Most government and international agencies that have predicted outcomes for the COVID-19 pandemic on families have indicated that the families at most risk are those who are living in poverty and have little access to outside resources for support (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020; Shen, 2020; United Nations Policy Brief, 2020). The stresses reported by the Yucatec Maya families due to loss of income and the loss of in-school instruction the Yucatec Maya families experienced support their predictions.

However, even so, the Yucatec Maya families displayed resilience in their lack of identification of worry or stress about their children's social-emotional outcomes from the pandemic, and sometimes even positive appraisals of the opportunities for their children to learn and participate more in family work. This was distinct from the reactions and orientations formulated by middle-class European-American parents in our sample and as reflected in the popular media of the time. The Maya interview data support the interpretation that it is the cultural organization of families' lives that produced this difference in resilience in the face of pandemic isolation. The mothers' reports from this study suggest that the overall well-being of Yucatec Maya children and their families, in spite of the fact that they have been faced with exacerbated poverty, has been less at risk during the pandemic than the overall well-being of middle-class European-American children in the United States. This

study demonstrates that children's risk and resilience is multifaceted, and that it is important to consider their well-being not only from the perspective of the view of government officials and researchers looking at economics and other macro factors, but also from their own cultural perspective that provides significant resources (Gaskins et al., 2007; Rogoff et al., 2017).


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## ORCID

Lucía Alcalá  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4499-9146>

Suzanne Gaskins  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8801-1895>

Lindsey E. Richland  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1514-6013>

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section.

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