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## The Impact of Home Language Maintenance and Acculturation Gaps Amongst Somali-American Families

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THE IMPACT OF HOME LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE AND ACCULTURATION GAPS  
AMONGST SOMALI-AMERICAN FAMILIES

by  
Morgyn Wade

A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Teaching English to Speakers of Other  
Languages

Hamline University

Saint Paul, Minnesota

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Primary Advisor: Julia Reimer  
Secondary Advisor: Jenny Holte  
Peer Reviewer: June Petrie

To all my friends and family who supported and encouraged me throughout this process,  
Thank you.

“And now that you don’t have to be perfect, you can be good.”

-John Steinbeck

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE Introduction	8
Home Language Maintenance	8
Personal and Professional Connections	9
Research Question and Approach	11
Conclusion	11
CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review	13
Chapter Overview	13
Somali-Americans in the US	14
Somali Americans in Minnesota	14
Home Language Maintenance	16
Barriers to Home Language Maintenance	16
Approaches to Home Language Maintenances Across Cultures	18
The Role of Language	21
Language and Culture	21
Language and Identity	26
Community and Family Dynamics	30
Community	30
Family Cohesion and Bonding	32
Acculturation Gaps	35
Acculturation Gaps in Somali American Families	35

Enculturation vs. Acculturation	37
Shortcomings of Current Research	38
Conclusion	39
CHAPTER THREE: Methods	41
Research Paradigm	41
Data Collection Instruments	43
Home Culture Attachment Scale	43
Relationships Structure Questionnaire	44
Language Use Survey	45
Settings and Participants	46
Procedure	46
Potential Pitfalls	48
Conclusion	48
CHAPTER FOUR: Results	49
Research Summary	49
Participants	50
Mohammed	50
Abshir	50
Survey Results and Analysis	50
Language Use Survey	51
Relationship Structures Questionnaire	52
Home Culture Attachment Scale	53
Conclusions	55

Interview Results and Analysis	55
Home Language Maintenance	56
The Role of Language	57
Family Connection	59
Acculturation Gaps	60
Summary	62
CHAPTER FIVE: Conclusion	63
Key Findings	63
Limitations	63
Small Sample Size	63
Limited Duration of Study	64
Questionnaire Construction	64
Researcher Bias	65
Implications	65
Implications for Families	65
Implications for Schools	66
Recommendations for Future Research	67
Summary	67
Personal Reflection	68
REFERENCES	69
APPENDICES	73
Appendix A	73
Appendix B	77



## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

#### Home Language Maintenance

Home language maintenance is an enduring and controversial topic within the English as Second Language (ESL) world. For some, it's a matter of practicality, for others a matter of necessity. Every year countless immigrants move to the United States. In fact, currently, over 44.7 million immigrants reside in the United States alone (Batalova et al., 2020). With every new family that comes to the United States, a choice has to be made. At some point, those families have to make a conscious decision on whether or not they want to work to maintain their home language or abandon it in an effort to assimilate to the new country and new culture. In some cases, the choice of one family member does not equal the choice for all the family members. In some scenarios, parents cling to the old ways while their children are eager to put the past behind them. Scenarios in which family members are divided over how they approach life in their new country cause what is considered an acculturation gap (Tardif-Williams et al., 2009). Acculturation gaps can cause a considerable amount of stress and strain not just on an individual, but on the family unit as a whole (Tardif-Williams et al., 2009). But not all families chose to split; in some cases, the family works together to maintain both a sense of the past and a way to adapt to life in a new country. Ultimately, the approaches to home language maintenance are vast and many. These will be explored more in-depth going forward. Considering how large a number of immigrants live in this country, it's a topic warrants ongoing research and discussion. I personally have spent several years working with such families and as such it has led me to want to further understand the situation of such families and to share their experiences with others.

## **Personal and professional connections**

My journey with English Language learners began back in early 2015. As a member of the Minnesota Reading Corps, I was required to seek outside volunteer hours apart from the school I worked at. The search for hours brought me to an Adult Basic Education program in the northern suburbs of Minneapolis. This program had a need for someone to assist in one of their intermediate-level ESL classes. I was placed there and asked to help with small groups of learners on their reading and writing skills. I spent about two years volunteering with the program for three hours a night, two nights a week on and off. Over the course of those two years, I got to know a number of the learners. One thing that struck me from the beginning, was the rich life history that each and every one of the learners had. They all had a story to tell; stories of whole entire lives lived prior to moving to the United States. I loved getting to hear these stories and experiences. I loved it so much that soon after joining the program as a volunteer, I began to seriously work towards finishing my education, the goal of which was to become an ESL teacher myself. Since 2015 I've volunteered and worked in a variety of different ESL classrooms, and spoken with learners of many different cultures and backgrounds, all of whom have been kind and wonderful souls.

Over the course of my academic career, the concept of home language maintenance was introduced early on. I still remember clearly the feeling welling up inside of me at the idea of languages being lost and families abandoning their culture and their history. To me personally, this feels like a tragedy, and I know many immigrant families who feel the same. I knew early on that I always wanted to do more with home language maintenance, that it was something I was passionate about advocating for and something that I actively encouraged my learners to

engage within my classroom. When it came time to pick a topic for my capstone, I knew this was something worth writing about and engaging on a higher academic level.

### ***Focus and Context***

While I've always been clear on the need for home language maintenance on an individual level, I never gave much thought to its impact on families as a whole. All of that changed in 2019. Beginning in the summer of 2019 I began working at a new learning center in the heart of Minneapolis. My work there brought me into contact with a new population of learners I had heretofore had little experience with. While this center is a mixture of cultures and populations (like all centers are), a vast majority of the learners I currently interact with are Somali-American. Furthermore, while at other learning centers there was a sense of distance between home and school, this center exhibited all the signs and livelihood of a true community. It is not uncommon for learners to share stories about their life at home; in fact, many teachers and volunteers actively encourage it. It is also fairly common for some of the learners to bring their children to class on days when elementary schools are closed and they couldn't arrange for child care.

Being in such a community-focused learning center helped me to recognize that home language maintenance is about more than just an individual, but rather it is something that impacts entire families, and to some extent entire communities. As I have worked with these learners and heard their stories, it struck me just how much these learners' lives were being impacted by the cultural divide taking place in their own homes. Time and again I saw learners shake their heads and mutter that their children were "American" and not part of their heritage. One learner talked about visiting her family in Africa and how her son spent the entire time in Africa staying inside at home because he didn't know the language and didn't know how to

interact with his own people. Stories like this are everywhere in my center, and with them is a common theme: frustration and helplessness. While many of the learners are saddened and upset by the lack of home language maintenance happening in their own homes they don't feel as though they can change their circumstances. They feel powerless to change the way things are. To that end, it is my goal through this research to discover the impact that language loss has on these families and to explore the familial divide created by acculturation gaps.

### **Research Question and Approach**

In this thesis, I'm studying home language maintenance and acculturation gaps within Somali-American families living in Minnesota. I am researching this because I want to find out how language and acculturation impact both communities and individuals. My goal in doing this research is to help readers and teachers understand why we should advocate for more language maintenance and why we should be more aware of the stressors of acculturation gaps in families. My question is: What impact does home language maintenance and acculturation gaps have on Somali-American families?

In order to truly capture the experience of Somali-American families, I feel that the best approach to this is to hear it directly from them. To that end, I conducted interviews with Somali-American families in order to hear from them directly about how they feel regarding these topics. I also collected quantitative data through surveys and questionnaires, however, my primary data collection and focus was on the interviews with individuals about their language use and familial connections.

### **Conclusion**

Thus far I have introduced the two major themes of this research: home language maintenance and acculturation gaps. I've provided a brief overview of my professional and

personal experience in the field of ESL and have expressed my interest in the research question. I have stated my research focus and goal: home language maintenance and acculturation gaps within Somali-American families living in Minneapolis; in order to find out how language and acculturation gaps impact both communities and individuals in an effort to help readers and teachers understand whether or not we should advocate for more language maintenance and why we should be more aware of the stressors of acculturation gaps in families. Going forward I will work to establish a link between my research and other research in the field.

In the next chapter, I will conduct a literature review in which I will explore the current and past research more in-depth while reviewing the major themes of my research and show how it connects to the previous research in the field. Chapter Three will detail the parameters of my research. Chapter Four will describe the research and discuss my findings and Chapter Five will conclude with a summary of my findings and future implications of my research.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **Literature Review**

For the purpose of this thesis, I am studying acculturation gaps and home language maintenance in immigrant families and the potential impact of home language loss. While much research has been conducted on language loss and division on a larger scale (whole societies and communities), little has been done to analyze its impact on smaller scales, such as family units or individuals. It could be that a lack of home language maintenance and thus loss may have an impact on both the large scale and the small scale. If so, then it is important to advocate for more home language maintenance and familial language unity. Furthermore, it appears as though widening acculturation gaps may cause shifts in family dynamics and stressors to both the whole family and the individual. To that end, my goal is to explore the potential importance of home language maintenance, the subsequent dangers of home language loss, and what impact those language choices have on both the family unit and by extension, the individual. Specifically, the research question being investigated in this project is: What impact does home language maintenance and acculturation gaps have on Somali American families and individuals?

#### **Chapter Overview**

The literature review will begin with a brief history of the background of Somali refugees within the United States of America. After the background information, there are then four major themes that will be explored in relation to the research question. These four areas of focus are: home language maintenance, the role of language, impacts of family cohesion, and acculturation gaps. Each of the four key areas will expand into subtopics. These subtopics cover issues such as language's role in relation to identity and culture, family bonding, community, assimilation, and

the ideologies behind parents' choices for or against home language maintenance. Following this review of the relevant studies and research, I will then establish my role going forward and discuss why my research matters amidst so much other research. The chapter ends with a preview of the content and the overall organization of Chapter Three.

### **Somali-Americans in the United States**

Most Somali families that reside in the United States have the status of refugees, having left their country due to the civil war that broke out in the Somalilands in 1991 (Boyle & Ali, 2010). Here it is important to pause a moment and take into consideration what it means first and foremost to be a refugee. Refugee is a unique status and those who are refugees face a unique set of challenges and struggles that go beyond that of voluntary immigrants. One of the biggest distinctions of being a refugee is that their journey to America is often not voluntary. The United Nations Refugee Agency defines their status this way: “Refugees are people fleeing conflict or persecution” (UNHCR, 2001). Furthermore, refugees rarely, if ever have the opportunity to return to their homelands. Of the Somali refugees that reside in the United States the two biggest concentrations of the population reside in either Columbus, Ohio, or Minneapolis, Minnesota (Chambers, 2017). As this study will focus primarily on the Minnesotan population the information and studies that follow will pertain mostly to Minnesota rather than Ohio.

### ***Somali-Americans in Minnesota***

Within Minneapolis, there are a few distinctive features of the Somali population that are worth noting. According to a research study done by Boyle and Ali in 2010, there are some differences in family dynamics in the United States and Minnesota compared to in Somalia. One of the most distinctive is that in the United States there is a much higher rate of female-headed households; while this number is still only about a quarter of the Somali households, it is

nevertheless a significant increase to the almost non-existent numbers of female-lead families in Somalia. As of the 2000 census, there is a particularly low number of intact families, indicating roughly 30% are individual households and that the percentage of Somali households headed solely by women is more than double the national average (Boyle & Ali 2010). At first look this news may be surprising; however, taken in context it makes a fair amount of sense. One reason for this division is the reality of the chaos and trauma surrounding the Somali family's arrival to the states. According to research individual family members often had to flee their homes without any prior notice (Boyle & Ali, 2010). Boyle and Ali interviewed over 43 Somalis living in the Twin Cities during their research and found that more often than not, Somali individuals arrived in the United States having experienced intense trauma and stress in addition to the separation and loss of contact with other family members. Trauma and family separation are not all that Somali-Americans have to deal with, however. One study conducted in 2017 brought up a particularly poignant note stating, "Somalis in the Twin Cities have faced a number of challenges. Their hardships became more pronounced post 9/11 when Muslims in the United States faced increased scrutiny and discrimination" (Chambers 2017, p. 83). Somalis (or really any ethnicity that practices Islam) face an added layer of difficulty when it comes to the pressure to acculturate in the United States. Because of racial tensions and anger towards Muslims, the pressure to make themselves more American is much stronger than it is for other immigrant and refugee populations (Marranci, 2003). It is very likely that these experiences may tie into some of the ideologies and attitudes that both the parents and their children have towards home language maintenance. In order to answer my research question, I believe it's important to understand the unique experiences of Somali American families and consider what impact those experiences may have on the decisions they make while living here. Their experiences matter



and may very well be a piece of understanding their perspectives on things like the role of language or on home language maintenance which will be discussed more in-depth next.

### **Home Language Maintenance**

Home language maintenance is a phrase commonly heard in the world of ESL education, it is usually followed with terms such as bilingual, heritage language, and acculturation vs. assimilation. Before going too much further it is crucial to have an understanding of this term and what it means. This is because many of the issues discussed in this chapter and in this research can be connected to home language maintenance. Indeed there are few topics that deal with language and immigrants that don't touch on home language maintenance.

A home language can be defined as “languages spoken or used in the home or community but which are not the majority language in the society” (Connaughton-Crean & Duibhir, 2017). Home language maintenance can then be understood as the persistent use and maintenance of one's home language. In some cases, it may be that the speaker chooses to retain and speak only their home language, or it could mean that they acquire a new language while continuing to use and preserve their home language.

### ***Barriers to Home Language Maintenance***

In regards to acquiring a new language while maintaining their home language, the research is fairly clear; the advantages of bilingualism far outweigh monolingualism. (Tannenbaum, 2005). However, home language maintenance still isn't happening in all families. One of the reasons for this, researchers argue, is the fact that while those in the upper academic realm are deeply acquainted with the benefits of bilingualism, very few parents are aware of the impact and benefits of it (Eisenclas & Schalley, 2019). Another barrier, particularly to newly immigrated families, is the overwhelming challenges and stresses that the parents face. Research

shows that, more often than not, newly immigrated families deal with tremendous pressures and challenges just to get by in their new country. As a result of all the demands of day-to-day life, little thought or energy can be given to home language maintenance (Gonzalez & Méndez-Pounds, 2018).

**Differing Beliefs and Ideologies.** An important factor in home language maintenance is the beliefs and ideologies of the families. Different cultures and different families have a variety of beliefs and ideologies regarding the value of maintaining their home language in contrast to assimilating to the new culture and abandoning their home language. A thorough understanding of these issues is important to understand if one is to research the impacts of language on family units.

To begin with, it's important to understand the conversations surrounding home language maintenance, i.e., the beliefs and attitudes surrounding it. Interviews with immigrants from around the world indicate a variety of beliefs and attitudes regarding home language maintenance, both positive and negative. Some of the primary concerns can be summarized as follows. For those that were in favor of abandoning their home language, there is pressure to assimilate, better opportunities, and a sense of shame or trauma attached to their previous language (Tannenbaum, 2005). On the other side of the issue are those who advocate for home language maintenance. The reasons parents advocate for home language maintenance are as follows: maintaining culture and ideals of home language, and academic and career advantages (Eisenchlas & Schalley, 2019). Both sides of the issue quote better opportunities as a reason for or against home language maintenance. This is because each family has its own unique experiences and needs and it is up to each families' interpretations of which route will provide better opportunities, not necessarily whether or not those ideas or beliefs are accurate. What is best for

some families may be best for all. There are undoubtedly a variety of other nuanced reasons and beliefs regarding this topic, but for the sake of brevity, this will suffice for now. The paper will now discuss specific research studies that explored the topic of home language maintenance.

### ***Approaches to Home Language Maintenance Across Cultures***

Somali-American beliefs and approaches to home language maintenance should be understood in the context of other cultures' approaches. Looking at and learning about research from families of other cultures serves to help inform the conclusions drawn from this study. While many studies and families support the idea of home language maintenance, the approaches, reasons, and ideas behind home language maintenance can vary from family to family.

**Home Language Maintenance in Ukrainian Families.** One study examining home language maintenance took place in Canada and focused on Ukrainian Families' approach to home language maintenance (Chumak-Horbatsch, 1999). This longitudinal study looked at language loss through age-related stages and studied both preschool and adolescence as well as the variety of factors that impact the changes through the ages. The study also examines the role of schools in language maintenance and addresses bigger issues within the education system. The article also explored the different attitudes and emotional reasons for either maintaining or losing one's language. The study ultimately concludes that language maintenance is more helpful than harmful to learners. Ultimately the article concluded that the benefits of home language maintenance far outweigh the advantages of not maintaining them.

**Korean American Families' Approach to Home Language Maintenance.** In a study focusing on Korean-American families, parent participants are quoted to say, "my house is a Korean island" (Kang, 2013, p. 434). This quote says a lot about how the family feels regarding

home language maintenance. Within the home, within the family, Korean is the rule, not English; it is the last defense against an ocean of American values and beliefs. The interview data suggest that the participating Korean parents all had strong desires to raise their children bilingually in English and Korean. These parents favored bilingualism because they believed that their children would achieve competence in English without their support, but that they need to provide additional support to achieve their children's development in Korean. Not only do the Korean-American families advocate for home language maintenance, but they actively work towards it. The researcher states, "This segment of the [...] conversation shows that the Kim family has specific plans for the status and functions of the Korean language as a "we-code" in the home domain. They use the Korean language consistently while interacting with their son" (Kang, 2013, p. 435). This research suggests that within Korean-American families home language maintenance is an intentional choice that requires specific actions and work from the parents to foster an environment that promotes home language maintenance.

**Home Language Maintenance in the United Kingdom.** Furthermore, families in the United Kingdom also advocate for home language maintenance, though some have differing views on the issue. A study done considering the feelings of Polish families on home language maintenance revealed a number of ideas and beliefs concerning home language maintenance (Gruszczyńska 2019). Nostalgia is a key point that research refers to in this study. The researchers noted that many parents considered language to be a vital medium of both cultural heritage and Polish patriotism. Furthermore, the parents felt that the process of assimilation often led to a lack of commitment to their homeland and in turn an inherent lack of effort given to language maintenance (Gruszczyńska 2019).

**Advantages of Home Language Maintenance in Mexican American Families.** All things considered, research concludes that bilingualism is far more advantageous than monolingualism. To that end, home language maintenance is a means for Somali-Americans to achieve bilingual status and by default gain the many advantages it has offered, particularly academically. For instance, a longitudinal study of Mexican-American preschoolers indicated that the preservation of home language and culture ensures optimal continued language development for young emergent bilinguals (Guiberson et al., 2006). This is just one example from a plethora of studies that indicate maintaining one's home language has tangible benefits academically. Another study within Mexican-American families also showed favorable results regarding home language maintenance stating “adolescents with higher levels of Mexican cultural orientations showed positive outcomes, regardless of their parents’ orientations to either American or Mexican cultures. Findings suggest that youths’ heritage cultural maintenance may be most important for their adjustment.” (Telzer, 2016, p. 1412) Arguably, home language maintenance would also lower the acculturation gap between family members, which is another pro of home language maintenance.

### ***Findings on Home Language Maintenance***

Home language maintenance means maintaining one’s language even if it’s not the primary language used within society. Home language maintenance has proven to be advantageous in a number of ways including academic and cultural preservation. People have many reasons and beliefs for keeping or losing their home language. Overall, home language maintenance is a personal choice, though parents and authority figures in families can make intentional choices to help support or foster the preservation of one’s home language. So far the studies mentioned have covered a range of cultures and different families’ opinions on home

language maintenance. Going forward it will be interesting to explore and see what perspective Somali-American families have towards home language maintenance.

### **The Role of Language**

Many scholars argue that language plays a vital role in any society. Language is a distinctive feature of human connection and it is arguably what separates us from our non-human counterparts; as such language plays a crucial role in any community. However, few fully understand just how much of an impact language has. The impacts of language can be both as far-reaching and nuanced as some of the most elusive academic concepts; it is both arbitrary and necessary. Language defines a community, as well as its individuals. At times language determines who is and who isn't part of the group. Decidedly, language plays a part in many aspects of our lives, including culture and families. It's important to closely explore language's roles in these key areas in order to talk more extensively about the potential need for intentional language maintenance and bilingual families. There are two key roles of language that need to be discussed as they relate to this paper. First is the relation language has to culture and the intricate ways in which language and culture interact. Second is the language's role in shaping and determining a speaker's sense of self and identity.

### ***Language and Culture***

What role does language have in a culture? Many researchers and psychologists have tried to establish a concrete link between the two; however, the distinction is not so easily made. If one were to look up the word "culture" in any dictionary you'll likely get a definition that says it is an entity that includes concepts about the customs, social institutions, and achievements of a particular nation or people group (Merriam-Webster n.d.). Other language researchers describe it as thus, "Culture is defined as the beliefs, attitudes, values, and standards of behavior passed

generationally” (Abney, as cited in Raman & Hodes, 2012, p. 31). The key aspect of this more language-centric definition is the idea of generational transference. However, in order for culture to be fully transferred from one generation to the next, a shared common language is needed. Ferguson (2016) explains this tie between language and culture as one that is deeply understood by those who speak the Yakut language. The Yakut language is a north Siberian Turkic language that to some, inextricably links language and culture. In an effort to better understand the Yakut language, Ferguson studied the culture and community of Yakut speakers. During her research, she also conducted several interviews with its speakers. Ferguson unearthed a belief that many speakers described as the idea that “language has a spirit” (p. 95). This idea suggests that language is more than just a set of arbitrary words strung together. This sentiment is strengthened by this quote of 19th century Germanic nationalism that argues “language is the soul of the people” (Ferguson, 2016, p. 99). Furthermore, Ferguson discovered that while the Yakut language was once in danger of extinction, a movement is occurring that is striving to revive and maintain this language. The main push behind this revival is the firm belief by its speakers that without the language their culture will also cease to exist. One interviewee stated their concern over the loss of culture and language by remarking “If we don’t speak it, who will?” (Ferguson, 2016, p. 97). Ferguson states that many speakers felt that the “mother language is inherently tied to the persistence of their culture” (p. 98). This means that without the language, the culture would die. Overall, both the interviewee’s statements and Ferguson’s research suggest a strong ideological connection between the Yakut language and the impact it has on its speakers. Both consider language and culture to be linked. While research shows that the Yakut language speakers firmly believe that language and culture are linked, more research will be needed to discover if Somali-American families feel the same.

**Culture and Word Association.** Indeed, there is seemingly no shortage of people willing to draw a connection between culture and language. Wenying (2000) argued for the connection between language and culture in her own research stating, “It is commonly accepted that language is a part of the culture and that it plays a very important role in it” (p. 334). With this mindset in mind, Wenying set out specifically to map the relationship between language and culture via their study on word association across cultures. This study proposed that “[l]anguage simultaneously reflects culture, and is influenced and shaped by it. In the broadest sense, it is also the symbolic representation of a people, since it comprises their historical and cultural backgrounds, as well as their approach to life and their ways of living and thinking” (Wenying, 2000, p. 328). To show the connection Wenying completed a study on word association in which she did a survey of word association between Chinese speakers and native English speakers. The survey included 10 words that related closely to people's lives including both material and spiritual aspects of life. The speakers were then asked to write down six additional words they associated with each of the ten. At the end of the study, Wenying argued that the results of these word association surveys revealed that there is a distinctive tie between language and culture; the items chosen by native Chinese speakers reflected that culture and vice versa for native English speakers. For example, one of the categories on the inventory was “meals”. Here the research revealed a marked difference between the answers given by native English speakers and Chinese speakers. The responses by native English speakers showed a stronger emphasis on words like ‘breakfast’, ‘lunch’, and ‘supper’. Wenying theorized that the difference here was due to the fact that in Chinese families those meals tended to consist of similar foods, whereas the native English speakers consumed very different types of food depending on the meal. Because of these cultural differences in their day-to-day lives and experiences, the participants chose different



words to associate with their meals. Wenying expanded her theory of the connection between language and culture by stating that “[b]etween language and culture there is always an interactive influence; the two cannot exist without each other” (p. 332). Overall, Wenying’s research suggests that there is, in fact, a correlation between language and culture and that the two impact each other in various ways.

**Opposing Arguments.** There are of course other studies that argue differently. Some researchers suggest that it is indeed possible to separate culture and language. In one such study, Barac and Bialystok (2012) worked with English monolinguals, Chinese-English bilinguals, French-English bilinguals, and Spanish-English bilinguals. At the start of the study, Barac and Bialystok hypothesized that they could prove a distinct separation between culture and language. The study participants were compared on three verbal tasks and one nonverbal executive control task to examine the generality of bilingual effects on development with Chinese-English bilinguals. Because the variance in language use and language exposure results were similar between the French-English bilinguals and the Spanish-English bilinguals, the study chose to compare and contrast the results of those groups to those of the Chinese-English bilinguals. The study began with a parent survey to assess the use of either English or the participant’s native languages both at home and at school. The survey revealed that the Chinese-English bilinguals received more non-English input at home than the other two groups. The other groups (Spanish and French bilinguals) reported similar amounts of exposure and use of English at home. After assessing the amount of language use at home and at school the children then went through a series of language tasks at school. These tasks included a number of cognitive and reading tests such as the wugs test (or more commonly known as the nonsense word test), sentence formation, and a color shape switching task.

The results of the tasks showed that the bilinguals out-performed monolinguals on nearly every task (Barac & Bialystok, 2012). This suggests that there are clear benefits to preserving one's native language in favor of being bilingual. The researchers also argued that there was little to no connection between cultural background and how the children performed on language tasks. The only definitive evidence they found was that bilingual children out-performed monolinguals, but there was no clear indication of the participant's performances being impacted or influenced by a cultural component. In fact, the researchers argued that their results supported the idea that it would be possible to separate the children's cultural background from their language usage. However, the researchers did concede that there was one area of testing that could have been impacted by culture. One of the language tasks presented a conflict inhibition measure, during which, a marked influence of East Asian culture was present. This goes to show that despite many indications and attempts to separate the language from the culture, there are still times in which the two still appear to be linked in some capacity.

### ***Reflecting on Language and Culture***

According to the research studies discussed above, many people are quick to draw a connection between language and culture. But not everyone draws that connection, and some actively seek to disprove the connection. Regardless of what researchers feel, it's important to think about what the speakers themselves feel about the connections between the two. The Yakut language speakers (Ferguson, 2016) were actively seeking to maintain their language because they strongly believed in a link between their culture and the language. But do all language speakers feel that strongly about the connection? And more specifically for the sake of my own research, how do Somali-Americans feel about this connection?

### *Language and Identity*

An individual's sense of self is determined by a number of factors. One cannot easily pinpoint a singular factor as the ultimate one in determining identity. That being said, language arguably plays an important role in shaping and defining one's identity. For instance, research conducted in an EFL classroom by teachers Duff and Uchida (1997) described the role of language in shaping their students' identities as thus:

Sociocultural identities and ideologies are not static, deterministic constructs that EFL teachers and students bring to the classroom and then take away unchanged at the end of a lesson or course .... Nor are they simply dictated by membership in a larger social, cultural, or linguistic group, the way many scholars approach the topic of language and social identity .... Rather, in educational practice as in other facets of social life, identities and beliefs are co-constructed, negotiated, and transformed on an ongoing basis by means of language. ( p. 452).

This line of thinking suggests a link between language and identity, arguing that the two influence each other in a similar way that language and culture impact each other. This study will be explored further later on.

**Mexican Identity and Language.** A research study conducted by Gonzalez and Mendez-Pounds (2018) explored immigrant families' opinions and feelings regarding language and identity. While the focus of this study was primarily on home language maintenance, the sentiments regarding the connection between language and identity are worth noting. In this study, Mexican immigrant families were interviewed and during these interviews, they noted that language and identity were inextricably linked. Many of the parents and immigrants involved in the interviews felt that it was important for their children to speak Spanish because speaking

Spanish was akin to knowing who they were and where they came from. Indeed, Gonzalez and Mendez-Pounds (2018) found that all who participated in the study shared this view and stressed the importance of their children continuing to speak Spanish. The reason they stressed this was because they viewed the Spanish language as a shared identity. This shared identity connected the individuals to their family and to their Mexican heritage. Furthermore, it allowed them to connect with their community because they could interact and socialize with them in Spanish. Based on the evidence from the interviews the connection for these families is clear: language and identity are one and the same.

**Somali-American Identity and Language.** A study conducted in rural Wisconsin also sought to understand the connections between identity and language. Brown and Carpenter (2018) studied a community of Somali-Americans in Barron, Wisconsin. Through a series of interviews, the researchers discovered much about the Somali community and their ideologies on language and identity. On the subject of identity Brown and Carpenter stated that “when contested or under duress, identity is a process of negotiation and the negotiation of identities are embedded within larger social and cultural systems and relationships of power” (p. 353). This suggests that identity then is determined by the social and cultural systems of which people are apart. Brown and Carpenter continued to explore this thread and sought to understand the community's feelings on English and whether or not that had any connection to their sense of identity. Through the various interviews, the researchers found that overall many of the Somali-American families had positive feelings about learning and speaking English. On a whole, they agreed that part of living and being in the United States meant that they should use and speak English. However, some of the interviewees did venture to suggest that speaking English at the expense of losing their Somali language was a detriment to the community as a

whole. One Somali speaker stated, “You may be brown, but if you don’t speak Somali, you’re not Somali” (p. 360). This statement suggests a clear-cut connection between the language and their national identity. Brown and Carpenter continued to explore the connection and revealed a number of different thoughts and opinions regarding language and identity as well as its relations to culture and the need for language maintenance. Some of those interviewed had strong feelings about their heritage language and its connection to their identities, while others had different opinions. Brown and Carpenter concluded that while there was no “one to one map between language and identity” there was a clear connection nonetheless (p. 366).

**The Role of Teachers in Shaping Identity.** The study by Duff and Uchida (1997) examined the ways in which identities were co-constructed between teachers and students across four different EFL classrooms in the Kansai Cross-Cultural Institute (KCCI) in Japan. The original aim of the study was to explore the shifting and changing constructions of the teachers’ identities, however in order to understand the shifts in the teachers’ identities, the study also explored the students’ identities. The study found that there were multiple things that impacted the teachers’ or the students’ construction and negotiation of identities. On the one hand, the teachers’ initial identities were rooted in personal histories and past experiences, however, these identities were constantly shifting and changing based on contextual elements. The study explored the contextual elements that have impacted these teachers’ identities which included classroom and instructional culture, as well as textbooks and other instructional materials. Ultimately the study highlighted the idea that culture and identity are constantly being negotiated and understood through both personal histories and classroom experiences. The study suggested that this same level of negotiation occurs for students of the teachers as well. It also noted that since this study dealt with language teachers a fair amount of culture was being conveyed via the

teachers whether through implicit or explicit instruction. Overall, this study didn't highlight much about how language and identity are connected. It did however suggest that culture and identity are linked. It is possible then, that if culture and language are linked as suggested by both Wenying (2000) and Ferguson (2016), then it may very well be that language and identity are also linked.

Nevertheless, the idea that teachers play a role in co-constructing the identities of their students is an interesting implication. If teachers truly do play a role in shaping learners' understanding of both identity and culture it warrants further exploration and research to see how best to prepare teachers to understand this connection and the impact they have on their students' lives.

### ***Home Culture Attachment Scale***

Other researchers agree that language plays a key role in identity. Pishghadam et al. (2013) wanted to develop a way to quantify the connection between home culture and language, as well as its impact on individual identity. To that end, they developed a comprehensive scale to gauge the interaction between language and culture. This scale, deemed the Home Culture Attachment scale (HCA), was developed initially in 2009 by Pishghadam and Kamyabi and later utilized in the study by Pishghadam et al. in 2013. The scale looks at home culture attachment by breaking up a person's identity into three categories: their religious identity, non-western identity, and national identity. Based on learners' responses to the survey researchers were able to make a connection between language and identity, stating that "the dialogue between home culture and foreign culture in class can help learners to create or maintain identities" (Pishghadam et al., 2013, p. 38). Here Pishghadam makes the same connection that was previously put forth by

Duff and Uchida (1997) suggesting that teachers do in fact play a role in developing or maintaining identities in the classroom.

### ***The Role of Language Summary***

Much has been discussed so far in terms of the role of language. Research seems to suggest that language plays a role in many aspects of our lives, including both culture and identity. To some the connections between the three are strong and clear, to others, it warrants more research to discover whether they are truly linked or not. Immigrant families such as Spanish-Americans, and Somali-Americans, also seem to connect these things together as well. Going forward it will be interesting to see if my research discovers information that agrees with or disagrees with Brown and Carpenters' (2018) findings regarding the attitudes and beliefs of Somali-American families surrounding language and identity.

### **Community and Family Dynamics**

As previously stated, language plays a vital role in a number of areas of our lives. Language's role in culture and identity has been discussed already. But that's not the end of language's impact on one's life. Another major focus of this thesis is how does language impact relationships within the family and the community? It is likely that language plays a crucial and multi-faceted role within the family unit in a number of areas. Some of these areas will be explored including, community bonding, family cohesion, and conflict.

### ***Community***

What is community? Sociologists and researchers are constantly trying to answer this question. One of the simplest ways to define community is to look at it as a social construct and a type of social organization (Hunter, 2018). If a community truly is socially based, then it stands to reason that having a shared language is an important part of a community. Communication and

thus language is essential in order to create a bond. This goes for parents and children, as well as the bonds amongst the community.

**Language as a Bonding Mechanism.** Conein (2012) sought to understand the role of language in bonding and in communities. In his opinion, language serves as an important bonding mechanism. One piece of the puzzle that he discovered was that “[t]he possibility of increasing the size of a social network beyond the conversation group is a product of language-based social information acquisition and exchange. With the acquisition of language, the capacities of social information-processing increase greatly.” (Conein, 2012, p. 128 ). This suggests that language is the gateway to social interactions and that without a common language individuals will struggle to understand and connect socially. Throughout the study, Conein collected and analyzed language samples from a variety of sources and looked for indicators of language as a bonding mechanism. He concluded that in terms of gossip, social networks, and other areas language is a determining factor that is necessary for creating and maintaining a bond between individuals. Likewise, language is necessary for creating a bond between family members as well. Therefore, it appears as though among humans, much of the social information and knowledge about others is transmitted via language. Language thus serves to help to create and maintain social relationships.

**Muslim Community in Ireland.** This idea that language serves as a medium for connecting communities is echoed in the research of Maranci. Marranci’s (2003) study focused on a community of Muslim refugees living in Northern Ireland. Throughout the study, Marranci documented the Muslims’ yearning for a sense of community. The driving factor for this desire was that they had been so far removed from their original homeland; without geography to connect them, something else had to fill that gap. While many members of the Northern Ireland



Muslim community had originally been from different tribes or areas of the world, they all shared one thing, they all had a shared language. Describing the connection between language and community, Marranci noted that, even though the refugees were at times from different countries they still sought a sense of community with one another. This sense of community, Marranci and the refugees argued, was directly from their use of Arabic which provided, “symbolic, although utopian, unity, ”(p. 64). Thus it seems that in this case, the use of the language is what unites this community of immigrants in their home away from home.

### ***Family Cohesion and Bonding***

Family cohesion can be difficult to achieve for any family; this is even more true for immigrant families. Within immigrant families, cohesion is oftentimes something that members of the families have to be intentional about. This is due to a number of reasons. Specific to Somali-American families as was mentioned previously, the nature of their departure from Somaliland often leads to them coming to the United States with already fractured families (Boyle & Ali 2010). Because of this, if the families are to have any sort of connection to their extended family, they must work to do so. This is the case in both Somali families and other immigrant families.

A family studies research defined family cohesion as “the emotional bonding that family members have towards one another” (Olson, 2000, p. 145). This research viewed the family as one unit, made up of individuals who are not independent of each other but rather parts in the whole. The study went on to explore the connections between family members and determined that family cohesion could be measured on a scale. The scale included four levels of cohesion, ranging from disengaged (very low) to separated (low to moderate) to connected (moderate to high) to enmeshed (very high). The study continued to explore the factors that contributed

towards healthy family dynamics and found that there were three factors that were involved in family interactions: flexibility, cohesion, and communication. Of these three, communication was found to be pivotal to the other two dimensions. This suggests that at the heart of family cohesion is communication. If communication is necessary for family cohesion then by extension a shared common language is also necessary for the sake of family cohesion.

**Bonding in Mexican-American families.** The study by Gonzalez and Mendez-Pounds (2018) not only discussed issues concerning language and identity, but also found that family cohesion was less happenstance and more a choice. The researcher noted that “As parents experienced many changes throughout the process of adapting to a new culture, family cohesion remained as a core value. Parents defined family cohesion as a source of support and as a family goal. This is demonstrated by offering emotional support and making it a priority to spend time with loved ones” (p.63). The descriptions given by the families here serve to illuminate the struggles involved when immigrating to a new country and how such struggles impact their choices when it comes to parenting. Participants came to the United States with little to no resources and started from the bottom, as many stated. Experiencing this hardship hindered their ability to be fully present in their children’s lives. Nevertheless, these parents strove to do their best to create an environment that fostered family cohesion.

**Lack of Family Cohesion for Asian-American Youths.** In contrast, another study was done to investigate the factors that contributed to the high rate of suicides that occurred in Asian-American youths (Wong et al., 2012). The researchers discovered a concerning trend in which a high number of Asian-American youths were either committing or considering suicide and wanted to see what issues impacted this trend. This study compared a number of factors one of which dealt with acculturation gaps and family cohesion. Participants in the study were those

who had been identified as experiencing psychological distress, which is also an indicator of suicide ideation. In regards to family cohesion, these participants were given a series of surveys that contained a range of questions about their families to test the level of their familial cohesion. Ultimately this study revealed that family cohesion was negatively associated with suicide ideation among low English proficiency Asian Americans but not among high English proficiency Asian Americans. In other words, a lack of family cohesion appeared to be a risk factor for suicide ideation only among low English proficiency participants. The researchers argued that while language proficiency did play a factor in suicide ideation, the biggest factor was family cohesion and bonding. The researchers theorized that more effort to mediate between family members and to create more intentional connections would help lower the risk of suicide.

### ***The Importance of Community and Family Bonding***

Many researchers have argued that community and family bonding are important matters. As Wong et al.s (2012) study shows, in some cases, these connections are so important that they can have dire impacts on one's mental and emotional health. Connection, both to a family and a community is important. In order for these connections to happen, there must be something to tie families and people together. One possible solution to a lack of community acceptance or family cohesion can be language. For Northern Ireland Muslims, language is the primary source of connection as they strive to hold onto a sense of community in a new country (Maranci, 2003). For others, such as the Spanish-American immigrants in Gonzalez and Mendez-Pounds (2018) study, staying connected via a shared language is a strong priority amongst many other needs and struggles as they adjust to day-to-day life in a new country. While some immigrant families are aware of the importance of connection and of a shared language, it may not be the case for all

families. It will be interesting to discover through research how Somali-American families feel about this need for connection and need for a shared language.

### **Acculturation gaps**

There is one final major topic to discuss; that is, acculturation gaps. Acculturation gaps occur within families when the members of the family acculturate to the new culture at different rates. While one member of the family adopts the new culture and new language fairly quickly and easily, another family member may not. This can be due to either a struggle to adapt or an unwillingness to adapt; regardless the results are often very similar (Lincoln et al., 2016). This then creates an acculturation gap within the family. Various studies have been conducted to gauge the impact that this gap has had on family dynamics and relations. Lincoln et al.'s reports that most if not all of these studies show this gap to cause added stress and tension throughout the family. At times this discord is strong enough to cause a severe enough fracture to result in concerning mental health states and damaged psychological states. The stress that is related to cultural adaptation has oftentimes been associated with poor mental health outcomes of refugee and immigrant youth, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. The study ultimately concluded that this same pattern existed across many cultures and families, regardless of background or country. For the sake of this thesis, it's worth looking into the specifics in regards to how the acculturation gap has impacted Somali-Americans and their families.

### ***Acculturation Gaps in Somali-American Families***

As research has pointed out, mental health problems are an issue for many Somalis in the United States (Chambers, 2017). Indeed there is a significantly growing number of cases of poor mental health among Somali-American youths, so much so that a considerable amount of

resources and funding has been given to support them. Studies have indicated that the greater the hassle or difficulty Somali-Americans have with the acculturation process the higher the rate of depressive and PTSD symptoms they experience. (Lincoln et al., 2016). If this research is to be trusted, then it is important to recognize the impact these acculturation gaps create and to start to explore avenues in which the gaps can be bridged.

**Acculturation Gaps amongst Bantu Somalis.** Narrowing the focus even more, within Somali refugees there is a subset of Somalis known as Bantu Somalis. Bantu Somalis have a distinctive culture and experience that is different from mainstream Somali culture; even within Somalia, the Bantu Somalis are considered a marginalized group (Lincoln et al., 2016). While Bantu Somalis are a separate group from the Somali-Americans this paper discusses, Lincoln et al.'s research done with Bantu Somalis still warrants exploration. In regards to their research on Bantu Somalis, the researchers found that acculturation gaps were high between parents and children among Bantu Somalis. This gap however was not caused by a lack of interest in maintaining their home language. Indeed both the parents and the youth valued their culture and heritage and opted for a desire to maintain the roots. The disconnect came when the children experienced difficulties and struggles within the school system. Many of the Bantu children reported that they faced a great deal of bullying and discrimination within the American school systems. Conversely, many of these children did not report these struggles to their parents. The reasons for not communicating these struggles to their parents were seemingly two-fold, on the one hand, it was shameful and difficult to share, but on the other, there was enough of a language gap between the children and parents that communicating their thoughts and feelings regarding the problem felt near impossible. As a result, the gap widened as the children found themselves under extreme pressure to acculturate to their American counterparts in school. This pressure

between school and parents caused great stress and lowered mental health states for many of the children. Reflecting on the experience of Bantu Somalis, it begs the question, is this the experience of other Somali groups in an American school system? If so, it could be that more efforts should be made to help bridge the gap between parents and children and if the school system itself is the cause of widening that gap then it may be up to the school system to work to manage such an adverse impact.

### ***Enculturation vs. Acculturation***

In contrast to the Somali-American experience is the Mexican-American experience. Though facing similar challenges and struggles, on the whole, it would appear as though Mexican-American families have had more luck with enculturation rather than acculturation. Enculturation is defined as the process by which a new culture is adapted and added to one's own culture (Gonzalez & Méndez-Pounds, 2018). The defining difference between acculturation and enculturation being that one is additive while the other is subtractive. Mexican-American enculturation however did not happen by mere happenstance; rather a number of factors contribute to it. Some research suggests that a big factor in this is typically the age of the children when they arrive in America (Telzer, 2016). This research suggests that the older the children are, the more they take ownership and pride over their heritage and seek to maintain it of their own accord. Overall this trend seems to result in better mental health and familial cohesion within the Mexican American community. Further research by Gonzalez, and Méndez-Pounds (2018) cites strong family and religious values as a defining feature as well. Specifically, this research points to the Hispanic practice of *familismo*, which is best described as the philosophy of putting one's family above one's self. The researchers state that "Familismo shapes and guides the actions and choices of some Hispanics' daily lives. Thus, indicating the

family's importance as a vital resource to one another" (p. 3). This research argues that because the family comes before the individual, Mexican-American families are more prone to maintain family values and dynamics even while adapting to new cultures.

### ***An Overview of Acculturation Gaps in Immigrant Families***

When families and individuals migrate to new countries they are often faced with a choice to either adopt the new culture or reject it. While some families choose to adapt entirely, others may choose to adapt while maintaining a sense of their own culture and previous beliefs and ideals. Regardless of whether families chose to acculturate or enculturate, the real issue is whether or not the whole family does so and if they do it at the same rate. If the rate of change is different amongst family members then a gap occurs. When gaps exist between family members it can cause strains on not only the family relationship but also the mental health of the individuals involved. Many things can impact an individual's decision to adopt a new culture or not, some of which include the topics previously mentioned like; home language maintenance and pressures from peers and school systems.

### **Shortcomings of Current Research**

My research deals specifically with Somali-American families. Specifically, my research question asks: What potential impact does home language loss and acculturation gaps have on Somali American families and why should teachers be aware of this impact? So far a great deal of research has been done detailing home language maintenance in a variety of cultures and contexts. However, little of this research has focused on the Somali-American population. To that end, I hope to remedy the gap in research and make the world more informed about the needs of Somali-American families, the struggles they face when it comes to home language maintenance and acculturation gaps amongst families, and the strain it has on individuals and communities

alike. This research is also unique in that Somali-Americans hold a refugee status, which is unlike many of the other populations that have been studied when it comes to home language maintenance. While other populations may be voluntary immigrants, Somali-Americans often had little to no choice in the manner of their arrival; nor do they have the ability to return to their homeland whenever they wish. A standard dictionary definition of refugee determines that a refugee is “a person who flees for refuge or safety, especially to a foreign country, as in a time of political upheaval, war, etc.” (Merriam-Webster n.d.) Indeed, life as a refugee is highly different from life as a voluntary immigrant, and these differences are worth noting. While refugees come with a host of strengths, such as greater resilience and higher levels of resourcefulness, being a refugee also carries a host of challenges as evidenced by research. Refugees often struggle with trauma, a loss of family support, and limited formal education experience (Kiiskila, 2018). All of these factors contribute to the experiences and lives of Somali-Americans and the fact that this research focuses primarily on Somali-Americans is what makes it unique.

## **Conclusion**

Over the course of this chapter, I have reviewed and discussed the relevant research regarding four major themes. These themes included: home language maintenance, the role of language, how families interact with language, and acculturation gaps. Within each of these themes, I have explored in detail the role they have on a global scale as well as how they pertain specifically to the many Somali families living in the United States. As a general rule these are the findings based on the previous research: language plays a vital role in shaping both culture and identity. Furthermore, family bonding is an important factor in mental health and general wellbeing. Family bonding however is next to impossible without a shared language, and acculturation gaps within families have the potential to cause massive rifts within the family and



conversely have highly negative effects on the socio-emotional well-being of the individuals within the family. Lastly, studies have shown that for the most part, the benefits of maintaining one's home language far outweigh the advantages of abandoning it. I have also shown the areas in which the research has fallen short and how I intend to bridge this gap with my own research and my own conclusions.

This chapter has focused on the past research and previous theories that pertain to my research question. During the next chapter, I detail my research methodology and outline the research approach. I will also share information regarding the participants of the study and how I collected data.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Methods

The purpose of this study was to discover the impact that home language maintenance and acculturation gaps have on Somali-American families residing in Minnesota. The research question was: What impact does home language maintenance and acculturation gaps have on Somali American families and individuals? As someone who works closely with a number of Somali-American families I have observed an increasing gap between Somali-American parents and their children and am curious to discover what the impacts of this shift are. I was curious to discover if what I have observed in my workplace is similar to the experience of other Somali-American families. In order to discover the effects and the implications of home language loss and acculturation gaps in Somali American families. I conducted a mixed-methods study.

The previous chapter discussed both past and current research pertaining to home language maintenance and acculturation gaps. It also discussed the role of language and detailed the importance of family cohesion. This chapter discusses in further detail my research approach and study. I will first detail my research paradigm, followed by a brief overview of the participants and setting for my research. Afterward, I will describe the steps I will take to gather and collect data followed by a look into the data analysis methods. Lastly, I will provide a brief summary of the contents of this chapter and a preview of the next.

#### **Research Paradigm**

In order to ensure the highest quality and the validity of the research for this study, I followed a mixed-methods approach. Mixed methods can be described as research where the researcher collects and analyzes data, integrates the findings and draws conclusions using both

qualitative and quantitative approaches in a single study or program of inquiry” (Tashokkori & Creswell, 2007). The center point of this research was a case study focusing on two Somali-American families. This case study involved interviews and a collection of both qualitative and quantitative data. While the interviews provided the primary source of qualitative data, I also collected quantitative data in order to further support the research findings and ensure quality research.

According to Mackey and Gass (2016) qualitative research is “descriptive data that does not make use of statistical procedures (p. 215). Mackey and Gass also make a point to note that the value and importance of qualitative research have been a respected aspect of second language studies for many years (2016). In addition to the qualitative research, I utilized quantitative research which includes “the quantification of data and numerical analysis” (p. 400).

### ***Qualitative Approach***

My initial thoughts and questions regarding this research came about due to my own observations while working with Somali-American families, thus the research itself has begun with a qualitative approach. My own personal observations are not enough, however, to fully support any kind of substantial claims regarding this phenomenon. In order to more fully investigate the impacts of home language maintenance and acculturation gaps, it is vital to hear directly from the individuals themselves which is why I chose to collect further qualitative data via one-on-one interviews with Somali-American individuals. These interviews themselves are crucial to understanding these individuals’ perceptions and attitudes regarding home language maintenance and the impact it has had on themselves and their families. The interviews were guided by a series of questions formulated to best gain insight into my research question. In

order to better inform the interview questions, the process began with a set of surveys and questionnaires to provide both quantitative and qualitative information.

Due to cautions and restrictions regarding the COVID 19 pandemic, the interviews were conducted via a video chat rather than in person. The interviews consisted of three different sets of questions, personal, parental, and children. During each section of the interview, the participants were asked open-ended questions about their feelings and attitudes towards home language maintenance and their connections with their family members. The participants were then asked questions about their parents' and their children's attitudes towards the same topics.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

There are a total of three data collection instruments that were used in this study. These three include: the Home Culture Attachment Scale, the Relationship Structures Questionnaire, and a language use survey, I will now go into more detail about the uses of these three instruments.

#### ***Home Culture Attachment Scale***

The initial questionnaire given was loosely based on the Home Cultural Attachment Scale (HCAS). The HCAS was first engineered by Pishghadam et al. (2013) in their study designed to explore the relationship between language learning and cultural attachment. The HCAS looks at home culture attachment by breaking up a person's identity into three categories: their religious identity, non-western identity, and national identity. Participants are then shown a set of statements from each category and are asked to self-identify their level of agreement with each statement. Each statement is accompanied by a number scale in which higher numbers indicate strong agreement and lower numbers strong disagreement. Most of the statements are in regards to the participant's preferences and likes or dislikes in regards to a particular category or cultural

aspect. Some statements compare and contrast the two cultures directly such as this statement: *I think American culture is richer than Somali culture*. Whereas other statements are less direct and focus more on a specific aspect of one of the two cultures, such as the statement: *I believe in fasting*. Both direct and indirect statements were designed to give an indication of which culture the participant is more attached to.

### ***Relationship Structures Questionnaire***

The Relationship Structures Questionnaire is a self-report instrument designed to assess attachment patterns in a variety of close relationships. This questionnaire was designed in 2006 by Fraley et al. During the questionnaire, participants were asked to provide input for a set of nine questions. The participants were asked to answer the same set of questions multiple times, each time with a focus on a different relationship. For this study, the participants answered the questions twice, first about their mother figure and then about their father figure. Input from the participants followed the same pattern as the HCAS survey in which they indicated their agreement or disagreement via a numbers scale. The questions are as follows:

1. It helps to turn to this person in times of need.
2. I usually discuss my problems and concerns with this person.
3. I talk things over with this person.
4. I find it easy to depend on this person.
5. I don't feel comfortable opening up to this person.
6. I prefer not to show this person how I feel deep down.
7. I often worry that this person doesn't really care for me.
8. I'm afraid that this person may abandon me.

9. I worry that this person won't care about me as much as I care about him or her.

The questions included both positive and negative responses, indicating either strong attachment or detachment. Based on participants' responses, one can determine the level of attachment they have for the figure about which they are answering the questions. Since the study is hoping to understand the importance of family cohesion and the impact of acculturation gaps it's important to use tools such as the relationships structures questionnaire to establish the level of attachment the participants have with their families members.

### *Language Use Survey*

Lastly, the participants completed a language use survey. The aim of the Language Use Survey (LUS) was two-fold. First, it was necessary to establish the participants' language usage throughout their lifetime, and secondly, to see if that language usage has changed throughout their life. The survey was broken up into three different time periods in the participants' lives as well as three different social spaces. The goal was to see if age or social context has had any significant impact on the participants' language usage. During this survey participants were asked to self-identify which language they considered to be their primary language (meaning the one they use the most) in the different stages and social places of their lives. These questions were open-ended and instead of selecting a language from a list, the participants answered by writing in their own responses. This was designed to recognize and make space for the fact that the participants may speak more languages than just English or Somali. It was also designed this way so that participants were encouraged and able to answer the questions honestly and freely without being swayed by a setlist which may or may not include any biases or expectations I as a

researcher had for which language they may use in different contexts.

**Summary of Research Collection Tools.** During this study I collected both qualitative and quantitative data. This mixed-methods approach was necessary to both gain the best input and to support the validity of the research claims. Quantitative data consisted of surveys and questionnaires including a modified version of the Home Culture Attachment Scale and the Relationships Structures Questionnaire. Qualitative data was collected through the language use survey and through one-on-one interviews. Both of these approaches offered valuable insight into the aims of this particular study.

### **Setting and Participants**

The participants were two Somali-American adults who reside in the Twin Cities of Minnesota. Many Somali-Americans came to the United States as refugees in the 90s and a large number of them reside in the twin cities of St. Paul or Minneapolis (Boyle & Ali, 2010) For this study, the participants are two well-educated adult males. Both participants are fluent in both English and Somali. The participants were selected from a sample of convenience. The participants were contacted via email and were given an overview of the study and its aims as well as a copy of the consent form. Participants were given chances to ask questions and to express any concerns they had about the study and were allowed to withdraw participation at any time if they felt the need to.

### **Procedure**

An initial set of interview and survey questions were created and reviewed prior to the start of the main research in order to help inform and shape the nature of the interview and survey questions. These questions were reviewed and edited for clarity and to help ensure they matched the scope of the research. After making the necessary revisions the questions were

reviewed by the IRB board to ensure ethical and safe research. After gaining approval from the IRB board the surveys and questionnaires were conducted via a Google form in which the participants could answer the questions in a secured online form. Answers from the surveys and questionnaires were recorded and no personal information was collected aside from what was needed to identify one participant's responses from the other. After the survey data was collected and analyzed I proceeded to do a one-on-one interview with the participants. These interviews were conducted and recorded via a video chat which was recorded and stored in a secure password-protected file. During every step of the research process, the participants were encouraged to ask questions and to speak up if they had concerns.

### ***Data Analysis***

Quantitative data was gathered via the surveys and served primarily to inform the questions asked for the interviews. However, it also served to help draw conclusions and make more broad or generalized claims regarding the attitudes and opinions of Somali-American families as a whole. The interviews themselves helped to narrow these claims and provided more detailed evidence regarding the claims. An open-coding system was used to look for and notice common themes that emerged throughout the interview themselves. Data and conclusions were drawn from these themes that connected with themes of the research question and to the field of second language research as a whole.

### ***Ethics***

In order to protect the identities and safety of the participants all information that was collected and gathered was done so anonymously. Records were not shared with anyone outside of the researchers. Furthermore, in regards to the learners directly involved in the interviews,



names were changed to ensure privacy. Data was stored on a secure server with password-protected files.

### **Potential Pitfalls**

It is important to take a moment to note the possible shortcomings that are to be found in conducting interviews as a source of primary data. Mackey and Gass (2016) bring up a worthwhile point in this quotation of theirs from Hall and Rist which states “Interviews may involve selective recall, self-delusion, perceptual distortions, memory loss and subjectivity in the researcher’s recording and interpreting of the data” (p. 26). In order to avoid such pitfalls, I designed the questions to approach the topics from a number of directions, in order to get a truer more accurate sense of things. Mackey and Gass also point out that it's important to be careful about the generalizations drawn from the study. Throughout the study I did my best to avoid faulty generalizations; I did so by staying mindful of the unique characteristics of my participants and recognized that their story is not the same as everyone else in their community. I also did my best to let the data speak for itself rather than impose any generalizations or conclusions that were not found within.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have stated my research question and outlined the process in which I plan to go about collecting the research. I explained that the research will be conducted using a mixed-methods approach and why I find it important to use this approach as opposed to focusing only on a qualitative or quantitative approach. I described the participants who partook in the study as well as the procedures I followed for collecting and analyzing the data. The following chapter will provide an in-depth look at the actual research itself, including the data collected and the analysis of the data.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Results

At the start of this thesis, I outlined my research question and goals. My question was: *What impact does home language maintenance and acculturation gaps have on Somali-American families?* In the previous chapter, I discussed the methodology of my study and detailed the data collection techniques and procedures used. In Chapter Four, I will provide a summary of the data collection process and the results. I will then present the findings obtained during this process, and analyze findings from the data. When presenting my findings I will begin by first discussing the results from the survey data and then move into an examination of the interview responses. This chapter will conclude with a summary of my findings.

#### Research Summary

I began data collection in April, 2021. I reached out to prospective participants via email and shared with them my research goals and aims while requesting they participate in the research. Once the participants understood the research and signed the letter of consent, I proceeded to send them the surveys to complete via Google Forms. I then collected the survey results and began the next phase of research which included a one-on-one Zoom interview with each participant. The interviews lasted for about 30 minutes each. During the interviews, the participants were asked a series of questions that were designed to better understand their opinions and thoughts on home language maintenance, the connection between language, culture, and family relationships. During the interviews, I at times had to adjust and either expand on a few questions or skip other questions. These were mostly the questions that involved their parents, as it proved to be that those questions were either not relevant or poorly suited for

the interviews. My research collection concluded at the end of the Zoom interviews and I began to organize and analyze the research findings. What follows is a summary of the findings.

### **The Participants**

In Chapter Three, I briefly introduced the two participants for this study: Mohammed and Abshir. Before discussing the data collected from them I want to give a fuller picture of their lives and experiences. I will now give a more in-depth introduction for each of the participants.

#### ***Mohammed***

Mohammed is the father of four children, ranging in ages from 2 to 11. He's lived in the United States for 21 years now. Prior to moving to Minnesota, he spent 8 years as a refugee in Kenya. Mohammed completed his high school degree in Minnesota and went on to study at the University of Minnesota. He is currently working on a Masters in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages. Mohammed's father passed away while he was still young and his mother currently lives in a nearby community in Minnesota.

#### ***Abshir***

Abshir is an adult male in his early 50s and is the father of four children. His children range in ages from 6-15. Abshir moved to the United States when he was 29, after spending eight years in Yemen. Abshir has completed his bachelors degree and holds a certificate in interpreting and in Teaching English as a Foreign Language. He currently works as a medical interpreter and administrator. His mother resides in Somalia and his father passed away when he was young.

### **Survey Results and Analysis**

The first part of the research collection involved three different data collection tools. These tools included the language use survey, the Relationship Structures Questionnaire and a modified version of the Home Culture Attachment Scale.

### *Language Use Survey (LUS)*

The aim of the Language Use Survey (LUS) was two-fold: to establish the participants' language usage throughout their lifetime, and to see if that language usage has changed throughout their life. The survey was broken up into three different time periods in the participants' lives as well as three different social spaces. The time periods included childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. The same questions were asked for each of the time periods and always started with a question that asked them to self-identify which language they felt was their primary language during these time periods. Within these time periods the questions centered around language use in three different spaces: home, school (or work), and social circles.

**Analysis of Survey Results.** A careful analysis of the results revealed that during childhood both participants spoke and used Somali in all three circles. By adolescence, a shift occurred for one of the participants, Mohammed, in which English began to be used. While Mohammed still self-identified Somali as their primary language during this time period, they noted that they used mostly English in school and they used both English and Somali to converse with friends. This makes sense considering that Mohammed attended high school in the United States. This reveals a widening of Mohammed's language usage but still keeps the Somali language as their priority and their focus. The other participant, Abshir, showed no shift during adolescence and still self-identified Somali for all three categories. Analysis of adulthood revealed a clear shift in both participants' language usage. Both Mohammed and Abshir stated they use both Somali and English as their primary languages and used both languages when conversing with friends and at home. Both participants reported that they primarily use English in their workplace. The final question in the survey was an open-ended one that asked

participants to explain (if relevant) why they used both languages at home. The answer for both can be summarized thusly: they used English at home to communicate with their children.

Based on the survey answers it can be concluded that while both participants continue to utilize their home language, they also use English in a functional manner; what began as the academic language used in school, carried into workplace English as well. They utilize English as a means of communication both in the workforce but also as needed when their children don't understand what they want to communicate in Somali. This suggests that in Somali families where the children don't acquire the Somali language, the only way for parents to fully communicate with their children would be to become fluent in English. One other conclusion that can be drawn is that both participants seem to value the English and Somali languages equally. I say this because though the survey itself never indicated that the participants should list two languages as primary at any point, by the adulthood period question, both participants opted to do just that. The participants listed English and Somali as their primary languages for adulthood. While this doesn't necessarily mean that the participants view Somali and English as completely equal, one could argue that. On the other hand, it could simply be that Mohammed and Abshir use both English and Somali an equal amount in their lives. It does not speak to if they actually truly believe that both languages are equally important. Further research would be needed to conclude just how equal the two languages are in the minds of these participants.

### ***Relationship Structures Questionnaire***

The goal of the Relationship Structures Questionnaire was to gain insight into the familial connections between participants and their parents. Each participant was asked a set of questions about how close they felt to a particular family member. The same set of questions were asked to them about their mother and their father. The question set contains questions that indicate either

positive or negative connections with their family members. Participants were given a number scale to indicate their level of agreement with the statements; higher numbers indicated strong agreement, and lower numbers indicated strong disagreement. If a participant selects more high numbers for positive association questions it indicates a strong familial bond and vice versa for the negative questions.

My analysis of these results revealed that both participants still felt extremely close to both of their parents. The scores for both mother and father were nearly identical and always fell on the strongly agreed side. The data reveals that despite a distinct change and shift in language usage, there is no shift in connection to family members. Familial ties and relationships have remained strong throughout. However, this could be interpreted as a result of the participants maintaining their home language use. As other researchers like Conein (2012) and Olson (2000) have indicated previously, communication and language are key in bonding. Could it be that because Mohammed and Abshir value the bond between themselves and their parents, they continue to maintain their Somali language? This certainly could be the case, but this study has not collected enough evidence to fully support this claim. Further research regarding this is recommended.

### ***Home Culture Attachment Scale (HCAS)***

The final survey that participants completed was a modified version of the Home Culture Attachment Scale: a series of questions designed to determine whether participants felt closer to their heritage culture, or to American culture. The questionnaire was divided into five subcategories: religion, America, Somalia, arts, and culture. For clarification purposes, Somalia refers more to the physical land, and things such as architecture and design, whereas culture refers to traditions and other cultural aspects such as literature and movies. This questionnaire

was structured similarly to the relationships structures questionnaire. Once again participants were given a statement and a number scale and asked to rank their agreement with statements that pertain to the different subcategories. During this survey the two participants showed several similarities, however, some differences were apparent as well. I will start with discussing the commonalities before moving into a discussion on the differences.

**Commonalities.** In all categories, both participants consistently recorded answers that were positive and showed a definite preference for their home culture over American culture. Both participants scored particularly high on areas that pertained to religion, and culture. Religion was the area where participants indicated a strong positive preference for their home culture. The second-highest category pertained to culture. Both participants showed strong attachments and preference to their home culture over American culture. This suggests that both participants still feel strongly about their heritage and culture.

**Disparities.** Surprisingly, the biggest differences showed up in the Somalia categories. Most of the answers to these questions indicated that the participants had a neutral or only slightly favorable or unfavorable view of Somalia. One question, in particular, asked if the participants thought of Somalia as the greatest civilization in the world, and while both gave positive answers, there was some definite discrepancy between the participants' answers as Abshir indicated a strong agreement while Mohammed actually slightly disagreed. Overall, these differences were only minor and still mostly indicated a preference towards Somali culture over American culture. Differences can be due to a number of factors, such as personalities, or different experiences. Without further information, it's hard to give a definitive answer as to what caused the differences between Mohammed and Abshir's answers.

## **Conclusions**

While the disparities between answers are worth noting, overall the research showed that the participants had strong positive associations with their home culture. This suggests that despite living in the United States for many years, both participants still feel strongly connected to their culture and their heritage. Taking into consideration that both participants continue to maintain their home language use, it could be argued that their connection to the language strengthens their connection to the culture as well. This would be similar to the findings in Gonzalez and Mendez-Pounds (2018) study which found that Spanish-American families perpetuated and transferred Spanish culture through language. Although, another reason for continued connection to culture could also be the fact that both participants spent much, if not all, of their childhood years living in Somalia, the amount of time spent there could also be a contributing factor in why they continue to feel connected to their home culture.

## **Interview Results and Analysis**

Each participants' interview lasted about 30 minutes after which the participants were each given a chance to add or amend anything at the end of their interviews. While more information could have been gleaned from an additional follow-up interview, the results from the first round of interviews provided a wealth of information in itself. I'll share key quotes from the interviews in relation to the four key areas: the role of language, home language maintenance, acculturation gaps, and family connections. I have edited the quotes slightly for ease of reading. When sharing quotes I will label them with different names depending on the participant I am quoting. I will conclude with a summary of my findings.



### *Home Language Maintenance*

Home Language maintenance is a topic covered extensively by many researchers including those mentioned in chapter 2, such as Telzer (2016), and Guiberson et al. (2006). Home language maintenance means the continued usage of one's home language. Meaning they continue to speak and use the language they first acquired. Many of the previously mentioned researchers argued that home language maintenance was important and had many advantages. While some researchers interviewed bilingual families and got opinions from them directly, little has been done to interview or discuss home language maintenance with Somali-American families. In an effort to understand the Somali-American perspective on home language maintenance I asked questions specifically aimed at understanding their perspective and opinions on the matter.

**Interviewer:** Do you think it's important for Somali people in general to maintain their home language use? [...] Do you want your children to maintain (or learn and maintain) their Somali language?

**Abshir** There's a huge correlation between personal ethnicity, culture, and language. In order for an individual to keep that culture, keep that personal history, I think it's important that they maintain and know that language as well. [...] I believe having your culture, your history of your parents, and being part of your community - I think you need to speak their language. So having them learn Somali and maintaining it I think will keep them being a part of the Somali community, and will keep that connection of my family members back home. So it is really very important and also opportunity-wise I think there is a lot of advantages knowing a second language

**Interviewer:** Do you think there are advantages to maintaining one's home language?

**Mohammed** There are advantages to maintaining home language because your parents gave it to you. They passed it to you and keeping it and nurturing it and then passing it to the next generation is the right thing to do.

**Analysis.** Overall, both participants show favor towards maintaining their home language. Similar to the previous section on the role of language, Abshir's quote highlights the idea that preserving the language is a way of preserving their history and their culture. On the other hand Mohammed makes an interesting statement when he says "It's the right thing to do". This could indicate a sort of moral imperative embedded within Somali culture; however, Abshir made no such claims. Other answers from the participants also showed that there were many practical reasons for maintaining the language and that they both find themselves utilizing both languages on a daily basis. This supports and strengthens the argument that maintaining a home language is an advantage in many areas, such as identity, culture, and profession. This agrees with other studies such as the one by Kang (2013) about Korean-American immigrants and their desire to maintain their home language.

### ***The Role of Language***

The role of language is a complex and difficult thing to fully understand. As mentioned in chapter 2, many argue that language plays a role in both identities and in culture. The connection between them though is not always clear and many have different opinions regarding how strong these connections are. I wanted to continue to explore these connections. Additionally, I wanted to know if there would be a difference in opinions across generations regarding the connections. During the interviews, I asked the participants questions aimed at these connections. Below are excerpts from the interviews that relate to these questions.

**Interviewer:** Do you think it's important to maintain (continue to speak) your Somali language use?

**Mohammed:** Language is identity, that's what we also learned in college. It's part of your identity. Losing your language means you lose part of your identity. And it becomes hard to identify yourself with a base group. Identifying oneself with a base group is the basis of what being a human is. You belong to a certain group you identify with and the language is the thing that keeps that group together. It could be regional or it could be country-wide but language keeps your identity. It [language] gives you a sense of belonging and it's also something to be grateful for; that you have a language plus that goes with that identity.

**Interviewer:** Can you describe a time your children expressed a direct opinion about their heritage?

**Abshir:** That's one of the things that I talk with them about and make them understand about their heritage. I think keeping your heritage and keeping who you are, I think will make you, will make them strong. I would say, I think if they lost their identity I think they will run into more issues. But knowing their identity will make them more independent and believe in themselves.

**Analysis.** Both participants make statements that support the idea that language and identity are closely related. Furthermore, they also argue that language plays a role in the culture itself and that without the language they cannot hope to preserve their identity or their culture. This supports other studies and findings that link the two such as the study by Duff and Uchida (1997), as well as the Yakut language study by Ferguson (2016).

### ***Family Connections***

I started this thesis wondering how language impacted family connections. Other researchers like Conein (2012) and Gonzalez & Mendez-Pounds(2018) explored the topic in their respective studies. I wanted to expand on their work and see for myself what kind of family connections could and do exist in immigrant families. Below are quotes and information regarding those connections

**Interviewer:** Describe your parents' relationship with your children.

**Mohammed:** We sometimes invite my mother to our house. Or sometimes I take the kids to her house and so they have that relationship. We eat, we spend time together and she tells them stories about growing up in Somalia and she likes to impart some of her cultural knowledge to her grandchildren. And she communicates in Somali and sometimes then when they aren't understanding some of the words, then I have to kind of jump in and help them understand what she's saying. So there's that relationship but sometimes there is that language barrier that could pop up once in a while.

**Interviewer:** Describe your parents' relationship with your children.

**Abshir:** Unfortunately my mom has never met with my children. My children were born here in the United States, and my mom has never been here so they never got the chance to see each other so the communication is over the phone, and that really happens once a while, based on the telecommunications or the communication system where my mom lives so there are certain kinds of obstacles to have access through the phone or anything else. So it's a very limited connection basically. [...] My older daughter speaks Somali. My other three children, they can understand the language [...] but they don't talk back much in Somali even though some of them are really working hard to pick up that

language to learn it, or in this case acquire it. But yes, I think language could be an issue today or when my mom talks with my children so they don't speak Somali very well especially the three younger ones and my mom doesn't speak English so there's kind of miscommunication there.

**Analysis.** Both participants cite language barriers and miscommunication when it comes to talking about their children's relationships with their grandparents. While Abshir's quote suggests that his children have been working on their Somali language, it also suggests that for the time being he must act as a linguistic bridge between his parents and his children. If Abshir or Mohammed did not continue to speak their Somali language and lost it, then chances are that their children would not be able to communicate with the older generation at all. Similar to Conein's (2012) study, this confirms the idea that language is needed both for bonding and for expanding one's social circles.

### ***Acculturation Gaps***

As described by Lincoln et al. (2016) acculturation gaps occur within families when the members of the family acculturate to the new culture at different rates. While one member of the family adopts the new culture and new language fairly quickly and easily, another family member may not. I wanted to see for myself if these same gaps existed within Somali-American families. What follows are my findings on acculturation gaps.

Little was revealed from the interviews about acculturation gaps. However, there are clear reasons for this. One is the age of the participants' children. Both participants alluded to the fact that because their children are still young there is little to no variance or push back from them regarding their culture. Nevertheless, both participants also made statements suggesting that they anticipate this will change as their children get older. Additionally, both participants alluded to

the fact that their own proficiency in both languages has made a tremendous difference and that they are far better off than other families who cannot so easily utilize both languages. Therefore, two conclusions can be drawn: For families with children growing up in the U.S. acculturation gaps happen at a later stage in life, and households with parents who are able to speak both English and their heritage language helps to bridge potential acculturation gaps. A wider pool of participants would be needed to confirm or disconfirm these suppositions.

***Additional Findings: Connection between Education and Language Use at Home***

**Interviewer:** If possible, describe a time in which you had a hard time communicating with your children.

**Mohammed:** I consider myself to be one of the lucky parents, when I say lucky meaning I can be in and out of either language. If communication stalls in Somali I may switch to English because in the school's kids of course are taught appropriate behaviors and stuff like that. [They are taught] what not to say and that behavior, because it needs to be reinforced at home, if I tried to reinforce that at home in Somali and I see them giving me that blank stare then I know- okay now let me switch to a language that they know and perhaps have heard in school. So I have that luxury of switching to a communication system style that they are familiar with. However, that is not the case for many parents who are not native speakers, it could be Hmong or Somali or Spanish families that communication stalls when the parents are not dual, they don't speak English, but with my kids, I think that is not an issue.

**Analysis.** Mohammed brings up an interesting point here about the connection of language between home and school. Especially when children are at a younger age and in schools that teach them certain behavioral patterns, it stands to reason that the same language

would be needed at home in order to reinforce the behaviors at home. This thinking can then be applied to other areas as well, not just behavioral training, but other school functions as well. If the language used at school is reinforced at home then the chances are much higher that whatever concept is being taught in the classroom is more likely to stick. This begs the question though, what would happen if the language use from home was used in the schools to help create a more uniform use of language both at home and in schools?

### **Summary**

In conclusion, the findings in this study agree with and support previous studies on the role of language in preserving cultural and personal identities. Furthermore, it agrees with other researchers' findings on home language maintenance and the importance of maintaining one's home language. Both the participants found home language maintenance extremely important and beneficial in a number of areas of their lives. This research also touches on issues of acculturation gaps but due to the unique situation of the participants (being wholly bilingual), it is not a true reflection of all Somali families and therefore should not be taken as a definitive representation of the whole Somali-American community. In regards to these particular participants, the continued maintenance of their home language has helped supersede potential acculturation gaps between their parents and their children. Lastly, the role schools and teachers play in language use is something that warrants further exploration.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Conclusion

In this chapter, I will detail the limitations that I discovered throughout the course of my research and discuss several implications based on my findings. I will share recommendations for future research that could be done to continue and widen the scope of this project. I will close with a summary of this chapter, which answers my research question: *What impact does home language maintenance and acculturation gaps have on Somali-American families?*

### Key Findings

Much of my research findings supported the current and past literature in regards to home language maintenance. Though little was discovered in regards to acculturation gaps, my research did confirm that both participants worried about gaps developing and growing as their children got older. Overall, the research indicated that language plays a role in both identity and culture and that there are some benefits to home language maintenance, including strengthening family communication, family bonds and helping to bridge gaps between different generations.

### Limitations

Upon commencement of my research, I quickly discovered that there were a number of factors that hampered my research. These factors included a small sample size, limited duration of the study, and a lack of proper questionnaire construction. I will now discuss each of these in greater detail below.

### *Small Sample Size*

My original intention for this research was, to begin with, a school-wide survey and then to narrow my focus for interviews down to a handful of students. Instead, I was only able to work with two participants for both the surveys and the interviews. A school-wide survey



certainly would've provided more information and added to the validity of the results that I found within the two participants. While the two participants provided plenty of information and I was able to extrapolate data based on the information provided, additional input from a larger pool of participants is recommended to further explore and either confirm or deny the findings from the data found here.

### ***Limited Duration of the Study***

One of the main foci of this study was the impact of acculturation gaps across familial generations. However, due to the short duration of the study, it was hard to collect accurate data on the true impact of acculturation gaps. Both of the participants alluded to the fact that they anticipated some degree of shifting to happen with their children's attitudes towards their heritage at some point in the years to come (likely during adolescence). A longer study that would continue to check in with the families as their children age and grow into adulthood would certainly add to the information already collected and potentially yield more accurate results.

### ***Questionnaire Construction***

During the course of this study, participants were asked to complete three separate questionnaires designed to provide insight into various aspects that pertained to the research question. While two of the surveys provided an accurate and reliable source of data, one survey was admittedly poorly suited for this research. The questionnaire in question is the Relationship Structures Questionnaire. While the intention of this study was to objectively gain information and insight into the level of closeness the participants had with their parents, it was formed on the base assumption that both parents were still alive and that the parents were living in close proximity to the participants. In truth, only one of the participants had a living parent within close proximity. In my opinion, this heavily skewed the results gained from this questionnaire as

both participants had to answer their questions based more on memories of their parents than on their current situation.

### ***Researcher Bias***

I began this research with my own set of biases and assumptions that have since shifted. One of the major assumptions I had going into this research was the idea that I could equate the Islamic faith with Somali culture. Specifically, during the home culture attachment scale survey, I collected data regarding the participants' attachment towards their home culture. Embedded in the survey were statements that pertained to the Islamic faith, such as *I believe it is necessary to give Zakat*, or: *I believe in fasting*. Initially, I equated responses to these statements as indicative of the participants' attachment to their Somali culture. Furthermore, during the interview portions of data collection, I made similar assumptions and asked similar questions. While answering these questions, both participants made clear statements regarding the separation between their faith and their culture. For Abshir and Mohammed, it was clear that practicing their faith and participating in religious traditions was not the same as participating in Somali culture and Somali traditions.

### **Implications**

Despite shortcomings, the study still yielded valuable data and insight into my research question. While my research question only focused specifically on families the data also revealed an additional set of implications for schools and teachers in particular.

### ***Implications for Families***

Both participants spoke highly of their ability to maintain their heritage language while being fluent in English. It's worth noting, however, that both participants also stressed that it was not necessarily English specifically that they want to advocate for, but rather that it's important

to learn and utilize the language of whatever culture (or country) you are residing in. Both participants also stressed the importance they felt for their children to maintain their heritage as well. One of the reasons for this that both participants cited was the belief that language and identity are interconnected and that without maintaining their Somali language they and their children lose a piece of that identity. This implies that Somali American families feel strongly about protecting and preserving their heritage and culture. Both participants also alluded to the fact that they were more fortunate than other parents in that they are able to fluently speak both of the languages, and that other parents were not so fortunate. This implies that more needs to be done to help support both the strengthening of the English language skills of the parents, but also the Somal language skills of the children. Both participants also referenced intentional choices to talk with their children about their culture and heritage and that seemed to help. Nevertheless, the concern for both participants is how the children would feel as they became older and more independent. This implies that for Mohammed and Abshir, they believe that further intentionality is needed to continue to foster a good relationship between their heritage and current culture.

### ***Implications for Schools***

The findings here agreed with the study completed by Duff and Uchida (1997), which indicated that teachers and schools play an integral role in shaping students' identities. This was especially illustrated in the interview portion of the research. During the interviews both participants alluded to the impact that schools have on their children, one even going so far as to point out that in order to reinforce behaviors learned at school, they felt the need to use the same language at home. This suggests that not only do teachers have an impact on the students, but also the large scale, school-wide systems that are in place for educational practices and behavior management. This suggests that both teachers and schools have an impact on students not just in

the classroom but also at home. More research should be done in schools to see what impact the teachers and school systems have on children and the level of awareness that teachers have of this impact. Some teachers may already be aware of their impact but more information can be helpful to foster the best possible relationship between the school systems, the teachers, and families.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

At this point, my research is completed. However, more research can and should be done to continue to answer the question I intended to address in this thesis. Specifically, further research should be done to explore the impact and implications for acculturation gaps; especially as children get older and more independent. A larger pool of participants should also be interviewed to either confirm or deny the information collected regarding home language maintenance and to confirm the assumption that Somali-American families believe strongly in maintaining and supporting their heritage and culture from generation to generation. Additionally, new questionnaires and tools should be created to better understand and gauge the relationship between family members. A more accurate tool to gauge relationships would be crucial in understanding the relational and emotional impacts of home language maintenance and acculturation gaps.

### **Summary**

In this chapter I presented the limitations of my research, implications for families and schools based on my findings, and provided suggestions for future research. I stated that my research showed definite indications on the positive impacts of home language maintenance and that more research would be needed to draw any type of definite conclusion regarding acculturation gaps. I discussed the limitations on my research, such as; a small participant pool,

lack of a proper questionnaire tool that could reliably measure the relationships within the family, and a need for longer-term study. I discussed the role of families in preserving their heritage and language and brought up the implications that teachers and schools impact their students both inside and outside the classroom. Finally, I provided recommendations on how to continue and improve upon the study that I created. While my research question was not fully answered, much valuable information and data has been gained into the question and I believe it provides a solid foundation for future research regarding the issue of home language maintenance and acculturation gaps within Somali-American families.

### **Personal Reflection**

When I began writing this thesis, I thought I knew a great deal about the topic already. However, throughout this process I have learned a great deal more about Somali-American families and about my own biases and assumptions. One of the biggest things I have learned was to respect and understand the distinct differences between religious practices and cultural traditions. I am grateful for my participants who graciously opened my eyes to this misconception and misunderstanding. I have also learned that all families are different, and while some families (like those I work with) may struggle to find a way to connect and communicate with their children, there are other families, like those of Abshir and Mohammed, who are actively bridging gaps with their cross language skills. Going forward I hope to continue to learn more, and to always keep an open mind.

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## APPENDIX A: Interview Questions

## Personal Questions:

1. What is your primary language? (primary meaning one you use the most/are most comfortable with)
2. Between Somali and English, which language do you like better?  
A) Why?
3. Do you think it's important to learn English?  
Why or why not?
4. Do you think it's important to maintain (continue to speak) your Somali language use?  
Why or Why not?
5. Do you think it's important for Somali people in general to maintain their home language use?  
Why or Why not?
6. Do you think there are advantages to maintaining one's home language?  
If so, what are they?
7. Do you think there are disadvantages to maintaining one's home language?  
If so, what are they?
8. Do you participate in any cultural traditions that came from Somali?  
If so, which ones:  
If not, why not?
9. Do you feel close to your parents?  
To your children?  
Why or Why not?

10. Has your attitude towards your heritage and language use changed over time?  
If so, how?
11. Were your parents involved in your education when you were younger?  
If so, can you describe in what ways they were involved?
12. Did your parents regularly communicate with your teachers when you were younger?  
If no, please explain why:

#### Questions About Parents:

1. What is your father's primary language? (primary meaning one they use the most/are most comfortable with)
2. What is your mother's primary language?
3. Please describe your Father's English language proficiency
4. Please describe your Mother's English Language proficiency
5. Between Somali and English, which language do you think your Father likes better?  
A) Why do you think that?
6. Between Somali and English, which language do you think your Mother likes better?  
A) Why do you think that?
7. Have either of your parents ever told you they think it's important to learn English?  
If so can you describe that conversation and why they think it's important?
8. Do you think your parents think it's important to maintain (continue to speak) their Somali language use?  
Why or Why not?
9. Have your parents ever expressed an opinion about Somali people in general needing to maintain their home language use?  
If so, can you please describe your parent's opinion?
10. Have your parents ever said that they think there are advantages to maintaining one's home language?

If so, what are they?

11. Have your parents ever said that they think there are disadvantages to maintaining one's home language?

If so, what are they?

8. Do your parents participate in any cultural traditions?

If so, what ones:

If not, why not?

9. Describe your parent's relationship with you

10. Describe your parents' relationship with your children

11. Have your parent's ever had difficulty communicating with any of your family members?

If so, why? What was the circumstance?

#### Questions about Children:

1. How many children do you have?

2. What ages are your children?

3. What language do your children primarily speak?

If English, do your children speak any Somali?

4. What language do you primarily use to speak to your children?

5. Do you think it's important that your children learn and speak Somali?

Why or Why not?

6. Do you want your children to maintain (or learn and maintain) their Somali language?

Why or Why not?

7. Do your children want to maintain (or learn and maintain) their Somali language?

8. How would you describe your children's attitudes towards their heritage?
  
9. Can you describe a time your children expressed a direct opinion about their heritage?  
If so, what was the context and was your child's opinion positive or negative?
  
10. Do you and your children participate in any Somali specific cultural traditions together?  
If so, which traditions?  
If so, do your children seem to enjoy participating?  
If no, why not?
  
11. How would you describe your children's relationships with their grandparents (your parents)?
  
12. Can you describe how your children communicate with older family members?
  
13. If possible, describe a time in which you had a hard time communicating with your children. What do you think the reason for the difficulty was?

## APPENDIX B: Survey and Questionnaire Instruments

**Language Use Survey**

Participant Instructions: Below is a series of questions about your language use throughout your life. Please answer all questions honestly and to the best of your ability.

**Childhood:**

What was your first language?

Which languages did you primarily speak in school?

Which languages did you primarily speak at home?

Which languages did you primarily speak with your friends?

**Adolescence:**

Which languages did you primarily speak in during your adolescence?

Which languages did you primarily speak in school?

Which language did you primarily speak in at home?

Which languages did you primarily speak in with your friends?

**Currently:**

What languages do you primarily speak in now?

Which languages do you primarily speak in at work?

Which languages do you primarily speak in with your friends?

Which languages do you primarily speak in at home?

If you use more than one language at home, please explain why

## **Relationship Structures (ECR-RS) Questionnaire**

The Relationship Structures (ECR-RS) questionnaire is a self-report instrument designed to assess attachment patterns in a variety of close relationships. The same 9 items are used to assess attachment styles with respect to 4 targets (i.e., mother, father, romantic partner, and best friend). The items were written in a way that allows them to be used for a variety of interpersonal targets (not just romantic relationships) and for a variety of age groups. If desired, the 9 items can be used to target only one kind of relationship and, therefore, this instrument can be used as a 9-item version of the ECR-R..

### **Questionnaire items**

1. It helps to turn to this person in times of need.
2. I usually discuss my problems and concerns with this person.
3. I talk things over with this person.
4. I find it easy to depend on this person.
5. I don't feel comfortable opening up to this person.
6. I prefer not to show this person how I feel deep down.
7. I often worry that this person doesn't really care for me.
8. I'm afraid that this person may abandon me.
9. I worry that this person won't care about me as much as I care about him or her.

**Instructions used for each relationship domain**

A. Please answer the following questions about your mother

B. Please answer the following questions about your father

1. It helps to turn to this person in times of need.

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly agree

2. I usually discuss my problems and concerns with this person.

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly agree

3. I talk things over with this person.

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly agree

4. I find it easy to depend on this person.

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly agree

5. I don't feel comfortable opening up to this person.

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly agree

6. I prefer not to show this person how I feel deep down.

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly agree

7. I often worry that this person doesn't really care for me.



strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly agree

8. I'm afraid that this person may abandon me.

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly agree

9. I worry that this person won't care about me as much as I care about him or her.

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly agree

### Home Culture Attachment Scale

Participant instructions: Please answer each question below honestly and to the best of your ability.

Question 1: I like American (English / American) music more than Somali music

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly agree

Question 2: I prefer to read American fiction books to Somali fiction books

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly agree

Question 3: In my opinion, the style of Somali architecture is more beautiful than the style of American architecture

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly agree

Question 4: I prefer my children to have American names rather than Somali names.

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly agree

Question 5: In my opinion, Somali culture and civilization is one of the greatest civilizations in the world

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly agree

Question 6: I prefer the atmosphere of traditional restaurants to modern ones

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly agree

Question 7: I consider it necessary to wear black clothes for religious mourning ceremonies

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly agree

Question 8: In my opinion, Ramadan is one of the most important ceremonies in the world

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly agree

Question 9: I know Somali writers better than American writers

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly agree

Question 10: I would rather watch American movies than Somali movies

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly agree

Question 11: I enjoy listening to local American dialects

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly agree

Question 12 I think Somali literature is much richer than American literature

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly agree

Question 13 I prefer to travel to Mecca than to travel to Europe

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly agree

Question 14 American films are more rich in content than Somali films

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly agree

Question 15 In my opinion, traditional Somali music is the best kind of music

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly agree

Question 16 Somali films are boring to me

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly agree

Question 17 I believe in fasting

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly agree

Question 18 Most American dishes are tastier than traditional Somali dishes

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly agree

Question 19 I consider it necessary to give zakat

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly agree

Question 20 In my opinion, English is more beautiful than Somali

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly agree

Question 21 I think American culture is richer than Somali culture

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly agree

Question 22 Somali films are more instructive than American films

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly agree

Question 23 It is more pleasant for me to buy from shops with American names

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly agree

Question 24 Marrying an American-born person is a good marriage

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly agree

Question 25 I like typical American hairstyles

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly agree

Question 26 I do not consider going to the mosque useful

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly agree

Question 27 I do not like the traditional Somali wedding ceremony

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly agree

Question 28 In my opinion, it is necessary to participate in religious ceremonies

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly agree

Question 29 I like holding Somali family parties

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly agree

Question 30 It is more pleasant for me to wear American branded clothes

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly agree

Question 31 I like documentaries about Somali traditions

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly agree

Question 32 I find peace when traveling to holy places

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly agree

Question 33 I like traditional Somali clothes

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly agree