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## Stages of Displacement: The Immigration Experience of Latinos

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### Abstract

Limited research has been conducted that examined the experiences of Latino immigrants in transitioning to the United States. As the Latino population continues to grow in the United States, it is important for rehabilitation counselors to be knowledgeable of this population and the characteristics of their transition as it may provide insight to the mental health needs of Latinos. Research has shown that experiences of acculturation differ among individuals in terms of their age, gender, level of education, socioeconomic status and language acquisition ability (Berry, 2001). This qualitative study investigated the stages of displacement experienced by Latinos immigrating to the United States. Specifically, this study examined the acculturation, attitudinal, behavioral, cultural identity shifts, and transition characteristics of Latino immigrants. Five distinct stages of displacement for Latino immigrants emerged: seeking opportunities, emotional reactions, adjustment, rationalization, and acknowledgement. Implications for rehabilitation counselors are discussed.

### Full Text

#### Headnote

Abstract - Limited research has been conducted that examined the experiences of Latino immigrants in transitioning to the United States. As the Latino population continues to grow in the United States, it is important for rehabilitation counselors to be knowledgeable of this population and the characteristics of their transition as it may provide insight to the mental health needs of Latinos. Research has shown that experiences of acculturation differ among individuals in terms of their age, gender, level of education, socioeconomic status and language acquisition ability (Berry, 2001). This qualitative study investigated the stages of displacement experienced by Latinos immigrating to the United States. Specifically, this study examined the acculturation, attitudinal, behavioral, cultural identity shifts, and transition characteristics of Latino immigrants. Five distinct stages of displacement for Latino immigrants emerged: seeking opportunities, emotional reactions, adjustment, rationalization, and acknowledgement. Implications for rehabilitation counselors are discussed.

Keywords: stages, stages of displacement, immigration, immigrant, Latino, Hispanics, rehabilitation of Latinos

According to the 2011 United States Census Bureau, in 2010 there were approximately 49,726,000 Hispanics living in the United States. It is estimated that by the year 2015, the Hispanic population will increase to 57,711,000 individuals (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). In 2009, approximately 10,750,000 unauthorized immigrants resided in the United States. The majority of the unauthorized immigrant population came from Mexico and numbered approximately 6,650,000 individuals. The terms Hispanic and Latino are often used interchangeably. However, throughout this article, the term Latino will be used when describing this population. As the Latino population continues to grow, it is important for rehabilitation counselors to be knowledgeable of this population and the characteristics of their transition. Furthermore, the transition process may provide insight as to the mental health needs of Latinos (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011).

#### Acculturation

Acculturation has been conceptualized as a bilinear process characterized by developing an orientation to both the dominant culture but also the culture of origin. Moreover, it is multidimensional encompassing behaviors, values, identity and knowledge. Lastly, acculturation is a socialization process that occurs in interaction with "social contexts" (e.g. home, school, work, West Coast, Midwest) (Yoon, Langrehr & Ong, 2011).

Many factors can affect the level and rate of acculturation. Research has shown that experiences of acculturation differ among individuals in terms of their age, gender, level of education, socioeconomic status, and language acquisition ability (Berry, 2001). Some individuals are acculturated more rapidly than others (Gil, Vega, & Dimas, 1994). For instance, younger and well-educated individuals tend to adapt faster and better than their older and less-educated counterparts (Berry, 2001; Dow, 2010). In addition, females tend to experience more adjustment problems than males (Dow, 2010).

Individual motivations for migrating have been examined, and the degree of impact on acculturation. Some immigrants involuntarily leave their homeland to flee from political violence. Fortuna, Porche, and Alegria (2008) examined political violence and psychosocial trauma among Latino immigrants. The results showed that 11% of Latino immigrants experienced some degree of political violence (PV). Moreover, their results indicated that "victims of PV are more than twice as likely to be immigrants" (p. 443) than Latinos born in the United States. A significant finding of the study indicated that 58% of Latino immigrants felt that they had to migrate to the United States, while Latino immigrants from Mexico primarily immigrated to the United States for economic advancement.

#### Attitudinal, Behavioral, and Cultural Identity Shifts

When cultural groups come in contact with one another, their attitudes, behaviors, and cultural identities can either be changed or maintained. The degree to which individuals change depends on how much they maintain their cultural identities (Berry, 2001). According to Berry (2001), behavioral shifts are the "core phenomenon of acculturation" (p.

621), and every behavior in an individual has the ability to change. However, a smooth transition to adjusting to the American culture requires both cultural shedding and cultural learning (Berry, 2001).

Berry (2001) developed a framework consisting of four strategies (i.e., integration, marginalization, assimilation, and separation) to describe the attitudes and cultural maintenance strategies of immigrants. Consequently, acculturation attitudes are contingent on the individual's degree of cultural maintenance and participation with the dominant culture (see Table 1).

#### Transition Characteristics of Latino Immigrants

Research has shown that Latino immigrants experience social, emotional, and behavioral adjustment problems in their transition to the United States (Harker, 2001). For instance, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), sleep disorders, and eating disorders are common among Latino immigrant children. Many of these children are also more likely to have problems with delinquency, alcohol, and drug dependency (Stodolska, 2008). Although these issues are significant, limited research has examined immigrant youth concerning the connections between their adaptation and psychological well-being (Harker, 2001).

Notwithstanding the lack of research, numerous theoretical models have been used to describe the process of displacement for Latino immigrants. Arredondo-Dowd (1981) posited that immigrants may experience personal loss and grief in their transition. For instance, immigrants may feel isolated and overwhelmed in their new surroundings. They may also develop feelings of anxiety and uncertainty as a result from their transition.

Although the subject has been discussed in the literature, limited research exists on the phenomenology of immigration and its impact on family system dynamics. Bacallao and Smokowski (2007) examined the family system dynamics of 10 undocumented Mexican families and the changes they experienced after immigration. Bacallao and Smokowski (2007) found that Mexican families immigrated to the United States for economic advancement and education for their children. Another finding was that Mexican families sequentially immigrated to the United States. Fathers typically immigrated first, leaving their wives and children in Mexico. Consequently, the family system was disrupted by the length of separation. For example, family roles were transformed and modified. Prior to immigration, fathers were generally the primary financial providers of the family. After immigration, it was common for Mexican families to have both parents working. Such changes in family roles and patterns of functioning increased the degree of family stress (Bacallao & Smokowski, 2007).

A significant part of the dynamic of the phenomenon of displacement is that Latino immigrants have "key commitments" (Soehl & Waldinger, 2011, p. 1505). In their country of Origin, immigrants usually have an affiliation or connection with a family member or close friend. Since Mexican immigrants usually sequentially immigrate to the United States (Bacallao and Smokowski, 2007), they often communicate with the remaining family to send them money (Soehl & Waldinger, 2011). Mexican immigrants may also be committed to their home country as a result of owning a business.

#### Rehabilitation of the Latino Immigrant with a Disability

Little research has been done concerning the vocational rehabilitation of Latinos with disabilities. Consequently, there is a paucity of research on Latino immigrants with disabilities (Moore, Giesen, & Cavanaugh, 2005; Reed, Holloway, Leung, & Menz, 2005; Santiago, Villarruel, & Leahy, 1996; Velcoff, Hernandez, & Keys, 2010). Research has demonstrated that Latinos underutilize rehabilitation services (Smart & Smart, 1992). Vocational rehabilitation literature has recognized culture and values as significantly influencing Latinos' participation in rehabilitation services (Smart & Smart, 1992). Furthermore, barriers to vocational rehabilitation services that have been identified for Latinos with disabilities include transportation, language issues, lack of knowledge of the rehabilitation process, cultural mistrust, low expectations of job placement, limited access to technology, and concepts of time. Concepts of time differed between the rehabilitation counselor and consumer. For the consumer, the concept of time often referred to their "lack of experience with the time demands of typical hourly jobs in the U.S. labor market, and/or a disability type that impacts a consumer's cognitive capacity for dealing with time" (Reed et al., 2005, p. 38). Additional issues are present if the Latino with a disability is an immigrant and is trying to manage acculturation, or if the immigrant has been living in a community more like his or her traditional culture than the dominant culture (Smart & Smart, 1991; Smart & Smart, 1994; Smart & Smart, 1992). Acculturative stress may be present when a Latino seeks vocational rehabilitation services (Velcoff, Hernandez & Keys, 2010). The consequences of this type of stress include negative influences on healing from illness and injury, decision making, and occupational functioning. As a result, the counselor-client relationship could be adversely affected (Smart & Smart, 1994).

Latino immigrants can migrate to the United States either legally or illegally. Latino immigrants who migrate legally tend to have documentation, such as a work visa, student visa, or green card. On the other hand, Latino immigrants who immigrate illegally do not have such documentation. Depending on the individual's financial means and reasons for migrating, the displacement experiences of Latino immigrants may differ from one another. The displacement experiences will affect Latinos with disabilities seeking and utilizing vocational rehabilitation services (Velcoff, Hernandez, & Keys, 2010). The purpose of this study was to investigate the stages of displacement experienced by Latinos immigrating to the US. More specifically, this study examined the acculturation, attitudinal, behavioral, cultural identity shifts, and transition characteristics of Latino immigrants. This qualitative study attempted to answer the following research question: What are the displacement stages of Latinos immigrating to the United States?

#### Method

##### Participants

Snowball sampling was utilized to recruit the participants (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Five participants were male and five were female. Their ages ranged from 23 years to 60 years. The length of time the participants had been residing in the United States ranged from 10 years to 43 years. Five participants spoke both Spanish and English, and the other five only spoke Spanish. Two had less than a high school education, three had completed high school, one participant had attended a vocational/technical/trade school, three had a bachelor's degree, and one had a master's degree. All participants resided in the State of Texas which borders with Mexico.

##### Data Collection

Data were collected utilizing a structured interview format. Interview questions were open-ended to allow the participants to describe their experiences in their own words. Examples of interview questions that specifically explored the stages of displacement experienced by Latino Immigrants included:

- \* Describe your experience in immigrating to the United States.
- \* What types of feelings and/or emotions did you have during the immigration process?
- \* Did your immediate family immigrate with you? If "yes", were their periods of family separation? If "yes", what types of feelings and/or emotions did you have?
- \* In what ways did you adjust to the American culture?
- \* How much of your traditional cultural do you continue to maintain?
- \* Did you experience any role changes during your transition? If "yes", did any conflicts arise?

Interviews were conducted via telephone and were not audio recorded to maintain confidentiality. Interview statements were transcribed by the primary researcher during the phone interview by typing the individuals' responses to the interview questions in a Microsoft Word document. The primary researcher used reflective listening and would clarify individuals' responses to ensure accurate documentation.

## Data Analysis

This study employed grounded theory methodology. According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), grounded theory procedures are considered rigorous when data collection and analysis are interrelated processes, concepts are used as the basic units of analysis, categories are developed and related, and sampling proceeds on theoretical grounds. Thus, the process of data analysis began immediately during the first interview. We incorporated a constant comparative method and theoretical sensitivity to effectively and analytically think about the emerging data to develop a theory (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Three stages of data analysis in grounded theory were used: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). The first stage was reading each transcript line by line and categorizing distinct components in the data. The second stage was organizing and examining the categories to see what themes manifested throughout the interviews. The third stage involved selective coding to derive the main idea of the data. Investigator triangulation was employed to promote descriptive validity. Further, interpretive validity was obtained by participant feedback. The researchers presented the categories and coding to the participants for confirmation of the themes (Johnson & Christensen, 2008).

## Results

Five distinct stages of displacement for Latino immigrants emerged: seeking opportunities, emotional reactions, adjustment, rationalization, and acknowledgement.

### Stage One: Seeking Opportunities

In the first stage of displacement, it was apparent that participants were immigrating to the United States to seek opportunities. This overall theme was clearly illustrated in by the following statement made by one participant: "You have the opportunity to make your life the way you want it." In addition, two main themes emerged: easy experience and difficult experience. Three subthemes emerged among participants who experienced an easy transition. These participants reported that they had the financial means to leave their home country, the experience was safe, and that work was easily obtained. For example, one participant reported having the financial means to transition to the United States. He stated, "My transition was a lot easier since I had my green card." Another reported, "It wasn't hard. I came here when I was 18 years old. I had family here. It wasn't dangerous as it is now. Those who had money had the ability to come here. Those that didn't stayed in Mexico."

Conversely, six subthemes emerged among participants who experienced a difficult transition. These participants reported experiencing discrimination and alienation in the United States. This sense of alienation experienced is illustrated by one participant, who stated, "I felt inferior. I felt like an outsider most of the time." In some cases, participants were called derogatory names. One reported being called a "wetback" and feeling as though he "stood out." Another stated, "I missed Mexico - a place where I knew my way around." These participants also experienced hardships and described their journey as dangerous. One participant reported having a dangerous transition experience as she "crossed the river by foot and alone," and it took her "14 days to get to the U.S." In addition, it was common for participants to commute for work and to boomerang between the U.S. and Mexico. Another reported,

My dad was a farmer in Mexico. I still had a tie to Mexico. My dad would come and go daily. He wouldn't stay over there. He would leave super early and get home late. I looked up to him as he sacrificed his education to care for my family.

### Stage Two: Emotional Reactions

During stage two, participants reported the emotional reactions that emerged in their immigration experience as their families sequentially immigrated to the United States. They reported experiencing emotions such as sadness, fear, and anxiety. Fear was more prevalent among participants who experienced a difficult transition. For instance, one immigrated by "foot and alone." and she felt "scared" throughout her journey. Participants who were sad and/or anxious experienced sequential family immigration, and they experienced significant role changes. One reported, "I experienced anxiety as a result of adjusting to this new life of mine...learning how to drive." Another de-scribed the feelings and emotions he experienced as a result of his family sequentially immigrating. He stated, "I was sad as there were years of separation. It was difficult because I wouldn't see them for years at a time. Parents and brothers eventually came." One participant's responses describe an array of emotions she experienced during her immigration process:

I wasn't angry. I was very sad actually and very anxious about coming. I was sad because.. I knew that by coming to the United States I was going to lose what I had already done in Mexico, which was I had already had my career going...I was leaving everything. My friends. My other family. My livelihood...I guess my work. My everything.

### Stage Three: Adjustment

In stage three, three main themes emerged. Participants provided comments regarding their assimilation to the United States, their maintenance of traditional culture, and role changes. Participants assimilated by becoming less collectivistic, learning English, transitioning to school, transitioning to work, and learning to drive. Participants reported that they maintained their traditional culture by continuing to respect their elders, by participating in celebrations from their home country, and by eating traditional foods. A significant finding was that there were more female role changes than male role changes. Females drastically changed their roles by becoming more independent, learning English, transitioning to school, transitioning to work, learning to drive, and decreasing their caregiver roles. It was evident in the interview responses that females found their transition more difficult than males. It was also apparent that the significant role changes for females not only affected them, but their family as well. For example, one participant stated:

I know my parents would have liked for me to stay home. My core values are to identify with the Mexican culture - be respectful to parents, pro-viding for them when they get older. It was hard for my family to accept that I left the home before marriage. Family would have preferred me to stay.

In addition, there was a theme prevalent in females illustrating the pressure they faced to change their roles. For instance, Subject S stated, "It isn't the same as in Mexico. I didn't want to learn how to drive, but I learned." Similarly, Subject 10 stated, "I didn't have time to adjust. When I came it was like I came one day and the following day I started learning how to drive and I started going to school to learn English and I just took what they call the 'bull by the horns' one day." Males, on the other hand, changed in that they became less family oriented. This theme is illustrated in one participant's response: "I became less collectivistic. In Mexico, my extended family would get together for holidays like New Years. Here in the U.S., we did our own thing."

### Stage Four: Rationalization

In stage four, a theme emerged in which participants were rationalizing reasons as to why they made the drastic change to immigrate to the United States. For example, one participant stated, "My parents' future of Mexico looked 'grimmer.' If I wanted a better education, I was to immigrate to the U.S." It was also evident that they felt a sense of loss as a result of their transition. Most Latino immigrants wanted a better life for their children and made the sacrifice to leave their extended families. A common theme prevalent among Latino immigrants was that they missed the family members they left behind in Mexico. For instance, one participant, "I was happy to be with my wife, but at the same time I missed my family in Mexico." Another stated:

We were separated for a while so this gave me the opportunity to be with my whole family. For me, I was happy since I was going to be with my kids. For my kids, it was going to be a better life for them. Also, my kids were able to learn a different language.

### Stage Five: Acknowledgement

In stage five, participants reported having a sense of acknowledgement for their transition to the United States. An interesting finding was that the participants did not report having accepted the U.S. way of life. They merely acknowledged the changes that they had to endure to make their transition. This can easily be seen in in one participant's

statement, "When I came over here, I knew I needed to work. I knew I needed to work to pay what needs to get paid." Another further illustrated the unhappiness she experienced as a result of having to change her way of life: "No happiness, but acceptance of reality. You just have to embrace it. I had to be here, but wasn't happy about it."

#### Implications for Rehabilitation Counselors

Embracing diversity to serve clients from all back-grounds is vital to the profession. Therefore, it is important that rehabilitation counseling professionals become familiar with the various problems Latino immigrants encounter during their transition to the United States. The stages of displacement that emerged provide an important conceptualization for counselors. Counselors who provide interventions to alleviate distress need to understand the psychological processing that Latino immigrants experience. For example, Garcia, Gilchrist, Vazquez, Leite, and Raymond (2010) investigated help-seeking behaviors in Latino immigrants. Latino immigrants' knowledge and beliefs regarding mental health services varied depending on the number of years they had been residing in a particular community, their age, and their gender. Another factor was that Latino individuals living in rural areas were less likely to know what to do in the event an adolescent voiced suicidal ideations. In contrast, those living in urban areas were "over five times more likely than rural respondents" (p. 503) to know where to take adolescents to seek help for suicidal ideations and depression. Thirty-five percent of urban Latino immigrants agreed with the statement, "In my culture seeing a mental health professional is crazy" (p. 500).

Research indicates that Latino immigrants with disabilities experience barriers to vocational rehabilitation services (Reed et.al, 2005). In some ways these barriers originate from the impact of their culture and values (Smart & Smart, 1992). Those factors in turn contribute to what the rehabilitation literature has termed as acculturative stress (Smart & Smart, 1994; Velcoff et. al, 2010). Accordingly, rehabilitation counselors need to be sensitive to these factors to increase the likelihood of Latino immigrants accessing and continuing in services (Smart & Smart, 1002). The stages of displacement from this research provide rehabilitation counselors with greater insight and sensitivity to the acculturative stress that Latino immigrants experience. The research suggests that addressing the stages that Latino immigrants are experiencing will provide greater mental health relief. It may also strengthen the client-counselor relationship.

It is evident that Latino immigrants are prone to acculturative stress and diminished health. A person centered approach used during the stages of displacement that emerged in this research may enrich the therapeutic relationship of counselor and immigrant (Rogers, 1951). Understanding the stages of displacement experienced by Latino immigrants may have beneficial outcomes.

Another powerful tool for rehabilitation counselors is to combine the stages of displacement with other strategies. Cabassa's (2003) Framework of Contextual Factors Influencing Acculturation is one strategy that could be very helpful in conjunction with the stages of displacement, and it can be used by rehabilitation counselors to better understand how Latinos adapt to their transition into the United States. This framework consists of three main contextual areas: prior immigration context, immigration context, and settlement context. The prior immigration context contains two elements: the individual's society of origin and individual factors. Rehabilitation counselors must consider the political, economic, and social environments from which the individual came. Rehabilitation counselors must also consider individual factors, such as the individual's demographics before immigration, reasons for immigrating, role in the immigration decision, prior knowledge or contact with the host society, separation from social support net-works, and loss of significant others. The immigration context consists of the following: type of immigration group, route of immigration, level of danger in the immigration journey, and duration of immigration journey. The settlement context contains two elements: the individual's society of settlement factors and individual factors. Similar to the prior immigration context, rehabilitation counseling professionals must consider the political, economic, and social environments in which the individual currently resides. In addition, consideration must be given to immigration policies and societal attitudes toward immigrants. Furthermore, attention must be given to individual factors, such as the individual's demographics during and after the settlement, age at the time of settlement, legal and residency status, cultural distance between culture of origin and culture of settlement, time in the new culture, and expectations for life in the new culture.

#### Conclusion

This study investigated the most frequent and significant stages of displacement among Latino immigrants living in a state bordering Mexico. Five distinct stages of displacement emerged: seeking opportunities, emotional reactions, adjustment, rationalization, and acknowledgement Latino immigrants seeking opportunities in the United States described having either an easy or difficult experience in their transition. Those who experienced an easy transition had the financial means, found work easily, and had a safe journey. Those who experienced a difficult transition faced discrimination, alienation, hardship, commuted for work, boomeranged between the United States and Mexico, and had a dangerous journey. Furthermore, Seven out of the 10 Latino immigrants' families sequentially immigrated. This family dynamic is consistent with that described by Bacallao and Smokowski (2001). In the present study, the sequential family immigration experience resulted in feelings of sadness, fear, and anxiety. Similarly, Arredondo-Dowd (1981) found that Latino immigrants may experience personal loss and grief in their transition. According to Berry (2001), a smooth transition requires both cultural shedding and cultural learning. In this study, the results illustrated ways in which Latino immigrants assimilated to the United States while maintaining aspects of their traditional culture. In addition, the results indicated that females experienced the most significant role changes. Females assimilated by becoming more independent, learning English, learning to drive, going to school, and working. Consequently, these roles changes led females to decrease their caregiver roles. An interesting finding was that participants rationalized and acknowledged reasons for leaving their home country and transitioning to the United States. As the Latino population continues to grow, it is important for rehabilitation counselors to be knowledgeable of this population and the characteristics of their transition. Therefore, results obtained from the present study may assist rehabilitation counselors in helping Latino immigrants manage their transition to the United States.

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**Details**

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