Immigration and Trauma: Examining Coping and Resiliency Among Latina/o Immigrants

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Abstract

Latinas/os are the largest racial/ethnic minority group, accounting for 16% of the U.S. population (Census, 2010). Between 2000 and 2010, more than half of the growth in the United States was due in part to Latinas/os (Census, 2010). Historically, the immigration process for Latina/o immigrants has been known to cause significant distress and to present perilous obstacles. Specifically, traumatic experiences and stressors while crossing the U.S./Mexico border were commonly found among Latinas/os (Shattell et al., 2008). In regards to rates of trauma, Fortuna, Porche, & Alegria (2008) found that 76% of Latina/o immigrants have had other traumatic experiences such as personal, physical, and sexual violence, in addition to political violence. With increasing immigration rates and significantly high trauma rates, it is important to analyze coping mechanisms and resiliency amongst Latina/o immigrants who experience adverse events as they transition into the United States. Cultural values and their influence on coping amongst Latina/o immigrants are often shaped by cultural and individual differences, also influencing the perception of what resources are available and acceptable for individuals (Bonnano, 2004). Latina/o cultural values, particularly amongst Mexican individuals, enact family and religious rituals that create a sense of collectivism, support, and "familismo," which ultimately emphasizes the prominence of support (Cervantes & Ramirez, 1992). Although familismo support has been vital to the transition process of Latina/o immigrants in the United States, there is limited literature on coping mechanisms they use. The research on coping suggests that Latinas/os engage in positive reinterpretation, focusing and venting emotions, social support, active coping, religion, emotional support, and planning as ways to cope, and those mechanisms were associated with positive physical and psychological health (Vaughn & Roesch, 2003). Additionally, Lucid (2010) reported that self-affirmation coping was a common Latina/o cultural value, which was found through religious faith. However, the limited research previously conducted on Latina/o coping strategies has primarily targeted college students, leaving a large portion of the Latina/o population less studied.

The immigration experience is daunting and traumatic as Latinas/os encounter unknown terrain. This exploratory paper summarizes available literature relating to trauma, coping, and resiliency among Latina/o immigrants and suggests next steps for interventions. Additionally, this paper will introduce and explore the various types of trauma experienced by Latinas/os

during migration that include (but are not limited to) exposure to political violence, psychosocial trauma, sexual violence, and witnessing violence (Fortuna, Porche, & Alegria, 2008).

Keywords: immigrant trauma, migration issues, violence toward immigrants

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Immigration and Trauma: An Overview

Latina/os are the largest racial/ethnic minority group, accounting for 16% of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Between 2000 and 2010, more than half of the growth in the United States was due in part to Latina/os (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). According to the Department of Homeland Security Report (2009), Mexican and Central American immigrants together account for 37% of all U.S. immigrants (4.7% of the total U.S. population). Given the high influx of Latina/os that are arriving in the United States, it is important to assess the likelihood that traveling immigrants will experience dangers, obstacles, and trauma. In addition, Latina/o immigrants experience discrimination not only in the United States upon arrival, but also within their home countries (Fortuna, Porche, & Alegria, 2008; Finch, Kolody, &Vega, 2000). This may serve as one factor towards increasing motivation to immigrate. Therefore, it is vital to examine the various dangers and traumas experienced during the immigration process and the negative psychological and behavioral effects on Latina/o immigrants. This exploratory paper summarizes the available literature relating to trauma, coping, and resiliency among Latina/o immigrants and suggests next steps for interventions.

There are a vast number of perilous obstacles that Latina/os may face en route to the United States when traveling from their home countries. The dangers encountered by undocumented immigrants crossing the U.S.-Mexico border consist of environmental conditions (heat and cold injuries), traumatic injuries (dehydration), and encounters with wild animals (DeLuca, McEwen, & Keim, 2008). However, there are additional traumatic events that Latina/o immigrants may encounter en route to the United States. Traumatic events can also include, but

are not limited to, deaths of others who are traveling in the same group, encounters with border patrol, physical injuries, physical assault at the hands of their coyote, and sexual abuse (DeLuca et al., 2008). Also, DeLuca et al. (2008) reported that even with the known dangers and potential adversity, 63% of their sample stated that they would attempt crossing a second and third time if they were not successful on the first attempt. An encounter with such experiences during immigration may increase the likelihood of experiencing some form of psychological distress and negative behavioral outcomes.

Historically, the immigration process for Latina/os has been known to cause significant distress and present hazardous obstacles. Specifically, traumatic experiences and stressors while crossing the U.S.-Mexico border were commonly found among Latina/os (Shattell et al., 2008). In regards to rates of trauma, 76% of Latina/o immigrants have experienced other traumatic experiences such as personal, physical, and sexual violence in addition to political violence (Fortuna, Porche, & Alegria, 2008). With regard to sexual trauma, Cuevas and Sabina's (2010) research suggests that lifetime rates of sexual assault may be as high as 17.2% among Latina women, whereas research among Latino men is virtually nonexistent. The rates of personal, physical, and sexual violence warrant further investigation regarding sexual assault, in addition to the research that has been conducted on political violence. This does not suggest that personal, physical, and sexual violence are weighted higher in severity of psychological distress among Latina/o immigrants than political violence, rather, it is necessary to continue the examination of all possible traumas that may be experienced.

Trauma and violence are additional societal concerns in Latin American countries. With

violence among the five main causes of death in Latin America and after years of political violence in their countries of origin, immigrants cross into the United States with major physical and mental health concerns such as psychosocial trauma (Asner-Self & Marotta, 2005; Rousseau & Drapeau, 2004). Eisenman et al. (2003) reported that 54% of immigrant Latina/os of diverse backgrounds had been exposed to some sort of political violence in their home country. As a result, studies have associated exposure to political violence with psychiatric disorders such as heat-related injuries and post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression (Eisenman et al., 2003; Fox et al., 2001; Pederson, 2002; Rousseau & Drapeau, 2004). With immigration rates increasing and trauma rates significantly high, it is important to analyze the various coping mechanisms utilized by and the resiliency of Latina/o immigrants who experienced adverse events as they transition into the United States. The purpose of further examining trauma and coping among Latina/o immigrants is to inform culturally relevant interventions that may assist in the healing process of survivors and reduce the psychological sequelae that may emerge as a result of these traumatic experiences.

Cultural Values and Their Influence on Coping Among Latina/o Immigrants

Coping strategies are often shaped by cultural and individual differences, which influence the perception of what resources are available and acceptable for individuals (Bonnano, 2004). Latina/o cultural values, particularly amongst Mexican individuals, enact family and religious rituals that create a sense of collectivism, support, and familismo, ultimately emphasizing the prominence of support (Cervantes & Ramirez, 1992). Familism is a cultural-specific value that socializes an ideal for interdependent family relationships that are close and supportive; the cultural value of familism is considered to be a core characteristic and one of the most important culture values for Latina/os and other collectivistic cultural groups (Moore, 1970; Sabogal et al., 1987; Schwartz et al., 2010). A key element of

familism is support that stems from within the family and extended family, where individuals can find various types of assistance (e.g., emotional support, protection, problem solving solutions) on a regular basis. People who emphasize familism prioritize their obligations to family, regard family members as a first source of social support, and take family needs into consideration when making important decisions. Additionally, previous studies on familism among Latina/os have proposed support rooted in familism as an explanation for the relatively "trouble free adaptation" of immigrants to the United States (Cohen, 1979; Rumbaut & Rumbaut, 1976; Szalay et al., 1978), in addition to relatively better mental health.

Although familism support has been vital to the transition of Latina/o immigrants within the United States, there is limited literature on coping mechanisms that they possess. Research suggests that Latina/os engage in positive reinterpretation, focusing and venting emotions, social support, active coping, religion, emotional support, and planning as ways to cope, and these were associated with positive physical and psychological health (Vaughn & Roesch, 2003). Additionally, Lucid (2010) reported that self-affirmation coping was a common Latina/o cultural value, which was found through religious faith. Pargament et al. (1998) defines religious coping as the use of religion in constructing appraisals, engaging in coping activities and processes, and shaping the coping process. Additionally, religious coping may involve the use of techniques that are cognitive or behavioral in relation to religion or spirituality (Tix & Frazier, 1998). Some examples of religious coping include seeking social support from a religious community or taking part in contemplative prayer. Harrison et al (2005) reported religious coping as a multidimensional construct related to physical and psychological health, health behaviors, and feelings of efficacy. In a recent study of religious coping among Central Americans, participants reported moderate to high levels of positive religious coping, for example, endorsing benevolent religious appraisal and collaborative religious coping (Dunn & O'Brien, 2009). In the same study, participants reported looking for strength and support from God

and reported collaborating with God to alleviate worries (Dunn & O'Brien, 2009). Also, participants endorsed negative religious coping at low to moderate levels, with the exception of pleading for direct intercession. The limited research previously conducted on Latina/o coping strategies has primarily targeted college students, leaving a large portion of the Latina/o population understudied and raising questions regarding the generalizability to the larger Latina/o population. Therefore, further investigation into the use of various coping strategies among Latina/o immigrants is needed.

The Emergence of Coping Strategies Following a Traumatic Experience

The immigration experience is not only daunting, but is also traumatic as Latina/os encounter unknown terrain. As noted previously, various types of trauma experienced by Latina/os during migration include, but are not limited to, exposure to political violence, psychosocial trauma, sexual violence, and witnessing violence (Fortuna, Porche, & Alegria, 2008). Little research examines the coping following the immigration process as various barriers could influence the discussion of the traumatic journey. For example, barriers that Latina/os may face in reporting sexual violence may include fear of deportation (Bryant-Davis, Chung, & Tillman, 2009). This may suggest that the discussion of their immigration process as well as trauma that emerged en route to the United States (e.g. sexual victimization) may also minimize discussion with mental health professionals and researchers. Therefore, it is possible that many coping strategies and forms of support that are utilized within the Latina/o population may be unexamined or not understood.

The implications for further research and culturally competent interventions are crucial in assisting Latina/o immigrants. There is a need for a cultural-specific coping scale that examines various coping strategies used by Latina/o immigrants towards alleviating the detrimental psychological effects of trauma. In addition, culturally competent interventions that focus on various types of trauma

(e.g. political trauma, physical trauma, sexual trauma, psychological trauma, emotional trauma) may benefit Latina/o immigrants once they have settled in the United States. Additionally, empowerment programs that assist Latina/o survivors of violence may potentially decrease significant psychological distress and conversely increase resiliency. With regard to undocumented Latina/o immigrants, psychoeducational interventions that discuss U.S. public policies that protect undocumented immigrants who have experienced sexual and domestic violence (e.g. Violence Against Women Act) may encourage the reporting of sexual assault, as knowing that the law guarantees protection may reduce fear of deportation. Intervention and prevention strategies are highly needed. Thus, this paper urges mental health professionals and researchers to further investigate the needs of Latina/o immigrants.

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