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San Juanita Garcia
Texas A&M University

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The Social Realities of Undocumented Mexican Immigrant Women and the Broader Implications for Adult Educators

San Juanita Garcia
Texas A&M University

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Abstract: This study highlights the critical realities Mexican undocumented immigrant women face in an anti-immigrant environment. Based on thirty face-to-face interviews with unauthorized Mexican immigrant women in Houston, Texas, a traditional gateway city, this study aims to explore the significance and reality that undocumented Mexican immigrant women endure in their everyday lives in an anti-immigrant climate and how this impacts depression symptomatology. I describe detailed narratives of three factors and their association to symptoms of depression among my participants. The findings provide recommendations for future research and implications for adult educators who teach vulnerable populations.

Introduction
Anti-immigrant sentiment especially targeting Mexicans in the United States has had a dramatic influence on the lives of immigrants and on how they perceive their host society. This paper addresses the following questions: 1) How do undocumented Mexican immigrant women navigate and make sense of their undocumented status in a nativist climate? and 2) How does this status relate to depression symptomatology? Grounded in segmented assimilation and critical race theories, I elucidate how Mexican-origin immigrant women are subjugated and oppressed in an anti-immigrant era. This paper highlights the valuable role of literacy educators as they work with undocumented Mexican immigrant women and provides recommendations in dealing with the psychological distress experienced by undocumented Mexican immigrant women. This study deals with nativism as defined by John Higham (1955) as an “intense opposition to an internal minority on the grounds of its foreign connections,” or the favoring of the native-born citizens over immigrants (p. 4). I also use the term anti-immigrant sentiment interchangeably and this refers to strong opposing views to immigration as seen by restrictive policies/laws, racism, or anti-immigrant groups.

Conceptual Frameworks
In order to understand the social realities among undocumented Mexican immigrant women living in the United States, I draw upon the literatures from immigration, Latina/o critical race studies, mental health, and adult education.
Segmented Assimilation Theory
Portes and Zhou (1993) predict three common paths to integration or adaptation into the United States society, what they coin as “segmented assimilation theory” and is described in the following ways: 1) similar to straight-line assimilation replicating the time or years in the United States with parallel integration into the white middle-class; 2) the second leads to permanent
poverty and assimilation into the “underclass” community – a complete opposite direction to the straight-line assimilation perspective; and 3) the third is caused by rapid economic mobility with intended maintenance of the immigrant community’s values, beliefs, and tight solidarity – this is similar to the definition of biculturalism in the acculturation literature. Portes and Zhou (1993) discuss how undocumented Mexican immigrants tend to “downward assimilate.” However, my study sheds light on the social realities and the subjugation undocumented Mexican immigrant women experience living in an anti-immigrant society and how their precarious undocumented status further limits their opportunities for upward mobility. In order to understand the complexities and nuances of Mexican undocumented immigrant women, I use Latina/o Critical Race theory (LatCrit) to assist me in analyzing the real life stories of undocumented women.

**Latina/o Critical Race Theory**

LatCrit allows me to critically analyze how these women are oppressed and subjugated given their undocumented status and the racist social structure that continues to devalue immigrants (Romero, 2008). Given that undocumented Mexican immigrants enter a negative context of reception such as by lacking legal status, entering a racialized labor market, and by entering a nativist society, these structural limitations contribute to the lack of opportunities. This paper builds on the segmented assimilation theory by bringing in the LatCrit literature to explain the social structure barriers that immigrants of color face in a racist society. It is my goal to move beyond simply looking at what segment my participants’ route into such as the “downward assimilation” model, but to examine the inequities which set structural barriers for them regardless of their drive, passion, and motivation to succeed. I am interested in looking beyond what segment my participants fall into toward an understanding of why and how these women, given their documentation status, experience and make sense of the subjugation and oppression that impede their opportunities for upward social mobility.

**Mental Health**

Research suggests that the longer undocumented Mexican immigrants remain in the United States, the more acculturated they become, which increases the risks of negative health outcomes. Why does this occur? Zambrana and Carter-Pokras (2001) argue that the decline of protective factors over time, the effects of poverty and the process of integration into the United States leads immigrants to have negative health outcomes. However, this paradox of depression rates between Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants should be further studied. Some notable factors that can be attributed to higher rates of depression among Mexican Americans are the low levels of education, low socio-economic status, and racism experienced in the United States. Additionally, people of color in the United States are more likely to live in impoverished neighborhoods and have to cope with urban and financial stress (Portes and Rumbaut, 2006).

I argue for a serious look at the contexts of reception in investigating how these major barriers impact the integration process and symptoms of depression among undocumented Mexican immigrant women. Furthermore, I argue that contrary to previous research studies perhaps there will be a rise in depression among undocumented Mexican immigrant women given their current vulnerable position in society and the unfavorable contexts of reception. Particularly, in current times, the significance, social ramifications, and views among the dominant society on what an undocumented Mexican immigrant signifies today, especially in an enforcement and anti-immigrant era, could severely impact these women’s mental health outcomes. The barriers they face ultimately trump the buffers that have typically protected Mexican immigrants; this is especially true for the undocumented population.

**Adult Education/Theories of Transformative Learning**
Transformative learning was introduced in 1978 by Jack Mezirow and since then it has evolved to be interpreted not solely in educational settings but it has moved to topics ranging from health to cultural assimilation (Taylor, 1997). Transformational theory is the ability to reflect critically on personal experiences, integrating this awareness into actual knowledge structures, and taking action based on these personal insights (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Transformative learning is a unique theoretical framework because it takes the lived experiences of adults as part of the cognitive process of learning, highlighting the ways that adults interpret their life experiences and create meaning of their experiences (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Transformative learning is a useful theoretical tool for this study because it takes into consideration how undocumented Mexican immigrant women’s lived experiences are a critical role in their own learning processes as they come to understand their new role in the United States, a vulnerable role due to their undocumented status and low-social position. Learning about their personal experiences through self-examination allows them to be critical of their experiences identifying ways in which these realizations can move towards formulating an actual plan in which they can take action of ways in which they can live their lives under this “new role.”

**Methodology**

Based on 30 in-depth interviews, this study investigates the degree to which nativism contributes to the social realization among Mexican undocumented immigrant women making sense of their undocumented status. The methodology employed in this study is qualitative and exploratory in nature. I used the snowball sampling technique to assist me in recruiting participants. Semi-structured interviews allowed me to capture the complexities and detailed narratives of what life is like as an undocumented immigrant in an anti-immigrant era. This qualitative approach also allowed for me to give voice to a much silenced and understudied group.

**Research Findings**

My findings reveal three main aspects of the undocumented experience that affect my respondents’ mental health. They are the following: 1) Fear; 2) Family Fragmentation; and 3) Economic Uncertainty. My findings highlight the reality of what living in an anti-immigrant society and the implications a label such as “undocumented status” brings with it. These women not only face social structural barriers which gravely limit their opportunities for upward mobility, but they must also learn how to navigate society in general within an environment that has labeled them as undocumented immigrants—a label that did not carry meaning for them in their former country. My findings also suggest that they use adult education opportunities (such as English as a Second Language or GED courses) as outlets for their frustrations as undocumented immigrants. Coupled with the typical stressors adult students face in literacy classes (Giancola, Grawitch, & Borchert, 2009), my participants also face a reality of being undocumented, further contributing to increased feelings of psychological distress. The broader implications highlight the overall salience of undocumented status for my participants and how this status limits their opportunities for successfully integrating into society. Moreover, these findings show how undocumented status affects their mental health, specifically depression symptoms.
**Constant Fear**

The respondents in my study shared sentiments of constant fear. Specifically, they expressed feelings of fear of the police, immigration officials, or of being separated from their families due to deportations. One participant, Zenaida, shared this fear:

*I feel sadness and fear at the same time, I’m always with that fear that something may happen like if the police stops me or that immigration will be there and I won’t be able to make it home or if I’m not with my kids… I’m scared… I’ll always be with that fear, sadness, and frustration… you become frustrated because you can’t do anything… like you can’t fix your papers to be here legally* (Zenaida, 23 years old).

Many respondents feared being apprehended or questioned by police or immigration officials. This constant fear contributed to feelings such as living in the shadows, imprisoned, secluded, limited, and hidden. These experiences contributed to symptoms of depression particularly because my respondents felt they did not have the security or safety from being deported or separated from their families.

**Family Fragmentation**

Respondents also described feelings of anguish due to the separation or fragmentation of family, loved ones, and their social support group from Mexico:

*There is a lot of solitude, a lot of loneliness, and a lot of nostalgia being here when you don’t have papers, you live an absence, you miss out on many of your family’s important life moments, your family from Mexico… if some of your family members from Mexico die, you can’t go because you can’t come back. There are holidays in which you long to be with them but you have to make the sacrifice* (Sonia, 28 years old).

When speaking about the fragmented transnational families, they expressed distress for not being able to travel back and forth between Mexico and the United States due to their undocumented status. Respondents again expressed feeling limited and secluded for not being able to travel not even within the United States to visit other family members as some have moved to new immigrant destinations.

**Economic Uncertainty**

Finally, respondents reported feelings of anxiety tied to the economic uncertainty of their futures brought upon by their undocumented statuses. One respondent, Carla, described this feeling with the following:

*Work opportunities are very limited and you have to keep pedaling and pedaling to find something… I think that’s why we get depressed and we lock ourselves in thinking we can’t, we can’t, and we can’t, and you fall…* (Carla, 29 years old).

My respondents described the economic limitations and exploitation they or their husband’s experienced. They also attributed this economic uncertainty to their undocumented status. They expressed how by being undocumented immigrants, they often had to put up with unfair treatment and exploitation such as being underpaid or not paid at all, being verbally degraded, and being overworked. Respondents expressed that they have to deal with these situations because they are undocumented immigrants and show how this status limits their chances in finding better job opportunities. This economic uncertainty which is related to being undocumented directly affects symptoms of depression as described by my respondents.
Discussion

These findings suggest the ways in which documentation status affects the mental health, integration, and societal outlook of undocumented immigrants. More specifically, these findings reveal the social significance of undocumented status and how the unequal social structure of the United States prevents the upward integration of these women. These findings show the salience of undocumented status and how the barriers associated with being undocumented in the United States may contribute to symptoms of depression. Given that these women enter a highly stratified society, they enter a society with an unfavorable context of reception as defined by their unauthorized status, a racialized labor market, and an anti-immigrant society, these women’s opportunities for upward mobility are highly affected due to their immigration status. These women migrated believing in the American Dream and learned that due to their unauthorized status they face many barriers in successfully integrating into U.S. society. They describe the United States as a double-edged sword due to their life experiences as undocumented immigrants.

The experiences of the participants in this study represent the complex and unjust circumstances that occur in a nativist society. They also show the importance of research that addresses inequalities such as those imposed on vulnerable populations and elucidates the importance of examining documentation status and its social implications in the integration process as well as the psychological distress they experience given their documentation status. These stories not only demonstrate the broader impact of how undocumented status limits their opportunities for upward mobility and how this affects their integration process, but they prove that the experiences of undocumented women are far more complex than what has been explained through trichotomous typologies of segmented assimilation models.

Implications for Adult Educators

The findings from my study offer several implications for adult educators working with learners who are undocumented immigrants. First, my findings point to the importance of the acknowledgement of the backgrounds and experiences of their adult learners (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). The women in my study have experiences unique to their situation as undocumented immigrants which affect their motivations to engage in education. Second, my findings suggest that the women in my study are seeking to enhance the lives of themselves and their children, but encounter structural barriers that limit certain opportunities. Policies might be reexamined to reduce the number of structural barriers. There are several key factors that may structure access to mental health care among Latinos (Vega & Lopez, 2001). Given that low socioeconomic position of many Latinos and lack of health insurance highly lessens their opportunities to access to health care. Other contextual issues such as federal and state initiatives also contribute to the limitations in access to health care especially for immigrant populations (Vega & Lopez, 2001). For instance, in California, anti-immigrant sentiment, behaviors, and policies have distanced Latinos from the health care system and therefore Latinos have been forced to use emergency rooms at greater rates (Fenton, Catalano, & Hargreaves, 1996). Finally, adult educators can help undocumented students to cope with their frustrations and possible depression by teaching them the medical and health terminology necessary to articulate their feelings. Adult educators can empower these women with the ability to seek out support in their communities.
References


