

**The Psychological Effects of Acculturative Stress Among Latino Immigrants in the U.S.**

By

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**Abstract**

Acculturative stress has been found to cause numerous psychological effects on Latino immigrants in the United States. This study aimed to examine the psychological effects that Latino immigrants in the United States face while adapting, as well as determine the social factors/stressors that have had the greatest impact on their emotional well-being and incorporation into the United States. In this study, I conducted 10 in-depth interviews with documented, Latino immigrants living in Westchester, NY. The responses revealed that family and social support, as well as family separation have had the greatest impact on their incorporation and emotional well-being. Despite the amount of years that the migrants have been living in the United States, negative psychological effects relating to family separation were found to be continuous in their lives.

**Introduction**

Many Latino immigrants residing in the United States have had to deal with the hardship of leaving behind their home country and entering an unfamiliar one. They leave behind their former lives in hopes of starting a better one. For many, the United States is viewed as a country with an abundance of opportunities. Opportunities that they would not have in their home country. However, when trying to adjust to their new lives, they may struggle with what is known as acculturative stress. Firstly, when Latino immigrants enter the United States and begin their new lives, they undergo what is known as acculturation. The term acculturation refers to changes of values, attitudes, and behaviors as a result of contact and interactions between cultural groups (Rivera 2007). This means that during the acculturation process, immigrants go through cultural, psychological and social changes. They are also vulnerable to being negatively affected throughout the acculturation process. The acculturation process leads to a term that was

created by researchers, acculturative stress, which refers to the level of psychosocial strain experienced by immigrants in response to the immigration-related challenges that they encounter while adapting to life in a foreign country (Cervantes, Padilla, and Salgado de Snyder 1991; Hovey 2000; Mena, Padilla, and Maldonado 1987; Arbona et al. 2010). In addition to this, empirical findings have indicated that acculturative stress is positively associated with psychological distress (Cervantes et al. 1991; Arbona et al. 2010).

When coming into the United States, many Latino immigrants are also leaving behind their loved ones from their home country. Latino culture traditionally stresses family and community. Along with family being a core characteristic of Latino culture, traditionally it has been important in providing emotional support for them (Hovey 2000). Some researchers have theorized that loss of family relationships may be one major cause of acculturative stress (Smart and Smart, 1995; Sarmiento and Cardemil 2009). Emotional strain, as a result of the absence of structural support and reinforced isolation for immigrants in the United States, may lead to them being more vulnerable to higher, longer lasting psychological stress. Discrimination, and English language skills are also social factors/stressors for Latinos throughout the acculturation process (Cook et al. 2009). These factors can influence their acculturation process and emotional well-being. However, for Latino's, their heavy emphasis on familial bonds may especially influence their acculturation process and emotional well-being. While previous studies provide a general overview of social factors/stressors that affect Latino immigrants throughout the acculturation process, further research is needed to narrow down and determine the social factors/stressors that have had the most impact throughout this process as well as their emotional well-being. My study will be examining how acculturative stress psychologically affects Latino immigrants in the United States, providing additional information regarding the relationship between acculturative stress and psychological outcomes, as well as determining which social

factors/stressors have had the greatest effect on their incorporation and emotional well-being. To better understand these sorts of effects on Latino immigrants, I adopted a qualitative research approach for my research.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Factors that Cause Acculturative Stress***

There are many contextual factors that can cause acculturative stress. According to Bekteshi and van Hook (2014), external context factors include the climate in the United States, which is broken down into unfavorable contexts of reception, country of origin, United States region of residence, and the number of years in the United States. External context factors also includes cultural context, consisting of family-culture conflict, age at the time of immigrating, current age, education, English skills, marital status, and children in household (Bekteshi and van Hook 2014). Then there are internal context factors, which consist of familismo, religious comfort, decision-making power, and personality (Bekteshi and van Hook 2014). The term familismo refers to family pride and being loyal to family and extended family. Socioeconomic status, in terms of poverty, is another factor that can cause acculturative stress (Hsieh et al. 2015). All of these factors affect the experience of living in the United States. Based on the severity of these factors, it can result in negative experiences.

While those are the overall context factors, there are also stressors that cause psychological distress among Latino immigrants. Stressors are activities, events, or other stimuli that cause stress. When there is an accumulation of stressors during the acculturation process, then it can lead to acculturative stress. Caplon (2007) identified three types of stressors among Latino immigrants, and they were categorized as instrumental/environmental, social/interpersonal, and societal (Arbona et al. 2010). Instrumental/environmental stressors

focus on challenges regarding employment opportunities, access to health care, and language difficulties. Social and interpersonal stressors refer to challenges regarding the reestablishment of sources of family support and social support, changing gender roles and family, and intergenerational conflicts (Arbona et al. 2010). Societal stressors involve challenges regarding discrimination and challenges that are associated with being an undocumented immigrant, such as the fear of deportation (Arbona et al. 2010). In a study conducted by Dawson and Panchanadeswaran (2010), the authors found that discrimination accounted for 35 percent of the differences in acculturative stress among Latinos (Bekteshi et al. 2015).

While these stressors apply to all Latino immigrants, their effects vary based on having a documented or undocumented status. A study conducted by Arbona et al. (2010) examined the differences between documented and undocumented Latino immigrants in the prevalence of three immigration related challenges (separation from family, traditionality, and language difficulties). They had found that undocumented Latino immigrants reported higher levels of these immigration challenges. However, both undocumented and documented immigrants reported similar levels of the fear of deportation (Arbona et al. 2010). Despite their legal status, it appears that documented immigrants share a similar fear with undocumented immigrants. While documented Latino immigrants have more privilege than those who are undocumented, that does not necessarily mean that the treatment that they receive is vastly different. For the most part, documented and undocumented Latino immigrants face the same context factors and stressors when trying to assimilate in the United States. While certain stressors may be worse for undocumented immigrants, documented immigrants are not necessarily safe from them.

### ***Psychological Effects***

Authors Smart and Smart (1995) deduced that acculturative stress has a prevalent, long-lasting impact on the psychological adjustment, decision-making abilities, occupational functioning, and physical health of Latinos (Miranda and Matheny 2000). Stressors corresponding with acculturation as a result of poor English fluency and accent might deter immigrants from searching for mental health care. This could negatively impact their mental health (Bulut and Gayman 2016). A study conducted by author Hovey and colleagues, found a positive relation of acculturative stress to anxiety and symptoms of depression, as well as suicidal ideation among Latino immigrants residing in rural and urban areas (Hovey 2000; Hovey and Magana 2000, 2002; Arbona et al. 2010). Also, in regard to suicidal ideation, Hovey (2000) found in his study about the relationship between acculturative stress, depression and suicidal ideation among Central American migrants, that six percent of the Central American migrants experienced critical levels of suicidal ideation. This had previously been connected to an increased risk for suicidal behavior (Rudd 1998; Hovey 2000). Hovey (2000) also mentioned that before his research, there had been no published studies about suicidal thoughts or behaviors among Central American immigrants. This indicates that the mental health of Central American immigrants may not be viewed as important enough for research and as a result, they are pushed off to the side.

Upon arriving in the United States, there is the possibility that some immigrants may be dealing with trauma as a result of events from their country of origin. Alongside experiences of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation, Latinos may also be experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder (Dunn and O'Brien 2009). Post-traumatic stress disorder may be caused by certain events such as war in the country of origin, and acculturative stress may possibly worsen it. Latino immigrants may experience stress and frustration as a result of unemployment, feeling as if they do not belong in the host country, and sense of anxious disorientation in response to their

unfamiliarity with their new environment (Hovey 2000). Research shows that while self-esteem may help to protect against distress during the acculturation process, having low self-esteem may place an individual at an increased risk for distress (Espin 1987; Hovey and Magana 2002). Self-esteem allows Latino immigrants to feel secure and good about themselves. Over time, their self-esteem could be lowered as a result of context factors or stressors. Acculturative stress may worsen how Latinos perceive themselves.

While some studies suggest a strong relation between higher levels of acculturation and higher psychological distress, other studies have found that lower levels of acculturation are related to higher levels of psychological distress (Rivera 2007). An explanation as to why this may be is not mentioned, but varying factors, such as location or time, may have resulted in these vastly different results. In relation to those studies about lower levels of acculturation, Roger et al. (1991) found that many negative mental health symptoms were frequently displayed by immigrants who were low in acculturation, in which they were recently uprooted from their traditional supportive interpersonal networks, did not have enough time to reconstruct these networks in the host society, and lacked instrumental skills such as knowledge of the host society's native language (Miranda and Umhoefer 1998). Immigrants who are low in acculturation are not able to adjust to their new environment, and as a result, they are left in a state of distress. Being unable to adjust also makes them stand out from others, which leads to further issues for them. In relation to the studies about higher levels of acculturation, a study conducted by Cook et al. (2009), had found that an increased amount of time in the U.S. is associated with higher risk of psychiatric disorder rates among Latino immigrants. The longer amount of time that Latino immigrants are in the United States, the longer that context factors and stressors have time to sink in and affect them psychologically. Throughout that time, various factors and stressors pile up and may continue to pile up, leading to negative outcomes. In a

study conducted by Hovey and Magana (2002), they found that migrant farm workers with high levels of acculturative stress were more likely to report high levels of anxiety and depression. The authors also found that low self-esteem was a strong predictor of depression and anxiety among the migrant farm workers (Hovey and Magana 2002).

Family separation has been tied to physical and psychological poor health, high levels of stress, harmful behaviors, as well as psychological ambivalence (Letiecq et al. 2013). When examining gender differences among Latino immigrants, Hiott et al. (2006) found that social marginalization was associated with greater symptoms of depression and separation from family stress was associated with greater symptoms of depression among women. Likewise, a study conducted by Sarmiento and Cardemil (2009) found that the relationship between family functioning and depression was stronger in women. These similarities indicate that Latinas adhere closely to cultural values, such as prioritizing the needs of family. For Latinas, disruptions in these values result in negative outcomes (Sarmiento & Cardemil 2009). Sarmiento and Cardemil (2009) had also found that Latino men's depression may come from other factors, such as stressors relating to finances and employment. While both men and women seek to support their families, Latino women are more of the nurturers, while Latino men are more of the protectors and providers. Cultural values, such as *marianismo* for Latino women and *machismo* for Latino men support these differences between them (Sarmiento and Cardemil 2009). However, a study conducted by Letiecq et al. (2013) found that in regard to being separated from their families, 46 percent of their male participants reported depressive symptoms within clinical concern. Based on previous research, there is a strong connection between acculturative stress and poor mental health. Depression and anxiety appear to have the strongest ties with acculturative stress. Problems with family are shown to be especially detrimental to the mental health of Latino immigrants when trying to incorporate themselves in the United States.



### ***Coping Behaviors/Strategies***

In order to cope with their new environment, Latino immigrants develop certain coping behaviors/strategies. While some coping behaviors/strategies may be positive, helpful methods, Latino immigrants may also turn to negative, harmful coping behaviors/strategies. Religion plays a large role in Latino culture and for them it can be influential during difficult life transitions, such as challenges experienced during the immigration process (Sanchez et al. 2014). Religious coping, a method used by Latino immigrants, refers to the use of cognitive and behavioral techniques that arise from an individual's religion or spirituality, when going through stressful life events (Sanchez et al. 2014). Religious coping styles include attending church, being involved in church-related activities, and prayers (Sanchez et al. 2014). Less acculturated Latinos use religious coping styles more often than Latinos who are more acculturated (Sanchez et al. 2014). This indicates that when Latinos are more recently in the United States, they maintain their religious beliefs and practices. However as they become more acculturated, they begin to lose these beliefs and practices. A study conducted by Ellison et al. (2009), reported that religious involvement seemed to worsen the effects of acculturative stress on the depressive symptoms of Latino immigrants (Sanchez et al. 2014). By turning to religion, Latino immigrants use it as a way of helping them to reduce stress. For them it is a way of channeling out their negativities and a way of helping them focus on positivity instead. Relating to this, Ai et al. (2014) found in their study, which examined the potential predictive value of cultural strength factors on Latinos' self-rated mental and physical health, that religious attendance had a positive effect on their respondent's self-rated mental health.

For Latinos, social support, especially family support, is of special interest since it works as a crucial buffering function in mental health due to the importance of traditional family values

among them (Rivera 2007). Social support is a psychological phenomenon in which social interactions provide individuals with assistance or insert them in social relationships (Dunn and O'Brien 2009). Social support helps provide individuals with a sense of belonging and identity. Findings from Rivera's (2007) study indicate a significant relationship between acculturation and depression that was moderated by family social support. A high level of perceived family support is the most crucial and stable aspect of Latino families (Rueschenberg and Buriel 1989; Sabogal, Marín, Otero-Sabogal, VanOss Marín, and Perez-Stable 1987; Hovey 2000). Latinos value their family and rely on them for guidance and comfort. If they were to lose ties with family members, then it would result in further, maybe greater distress for them. Research indicates that low family support and familismo relate to an increase in smoking and symptoms of depression in Latinos (Rivera 2007; Rivera et al. 2008; Coonrod et al. 1999; Lorenzo-Blanco and Cortina 2012).

Unfortunately, many Latino immigrants turn to alcohol or smoking as ways of coping in the United States. Smoking and drinking may also be used by them as a way of self-medicating. Research indicates that markers of acculturation among Latinos are related to higher occurrence of major depressive disorder and cigarette smoking (Lorenzo-Blanco and Cortina 2012).

Acculturative stress has been found to account for a significant variance in drinking problems (Lee et al. 2013). An increased amount of time in the U.S. has been associated with increases in alcohol use among Latino immigrants (De La Rosa 2014). Alcohol misuse among Latinos is an ineffective coping method in response to acculturation stressors that are recognized as chronic and highly difficult to overcome (Lee et al. 2013). While alcohol is an ineffective coping method, for them it may be a last resort. If they found other methods to be ineffective, then they may feel as if they have no other options and as a result, turn to drinking and smoking. Chronic, invisible, and damaging effects of perceived discrimination and social isolation, unfair treatment

in the U.S., family conflicts as a result of acculturation changes in families, and the loss of valued social supports have been associated with an increased amount of alcohol and substance abuse (Lee et al. 2013). As shown from previous research, the relationship between coping behaviors/strategies and acculturative stress is significant, especially in the case of family support. While religion is a large part of Latino culture, family and social support is an even greater part of Latino culture. Due to the level of importance that family support has among Latinos, changes in it as a result of the acculturation process is a hard blow for them to handle.

### *Theory*

Upon arriving in the United States, Latino immigrants are viewed as outsiders. Latino immigrants are perceived as different to the group consisting of U.S. citizens, and that is made clear by U.S. citizens. Author Kurt Wolff (1950), discusses Georg Simmel's theory, *The Stranger*, and explains that the stranger is seen by others in a way that makes it clear that he is not a native member of the group. No matter the amount of time the stranger remains in a location, he will never obtain the status of being one of them. This relates to the acculturation process among Latino immigrants, because while adapting to the culture in the U.S., they are attempting to conform to this culture in order to become accepted as American. However, even though they are changing their values, attitudes, and behaviors in order to become American, they continue to be perceived by native U.S. citizens as outsiders or not truly Americans. Throughout the acculturation process, factors such as lack of English skills can not only make it clear to U.S. citizens that they are different and outsiders, but it also may make Latino immigrants feel as though they are outsiders even more than they already do.

According to Wolff (1950), Simmel stated that the stranger is no "owner of soil" of soil in both a physical and figurative sense. While the stranger may develop all sorts of charm and

significance, as long as he is perceived as a stranger, he cannot be an “owner of soil.” Similar to the stranger, immigrants are able to build relationships with those around them and provide items to exchange. However, as mentioned, the stranger is constantly perceived as being different. This is also the case for immigrants. In addition to this, even though Latino immigrants are trying to adapt and be accepted into U.S. culture, they will never be seen as owner of soil. Many Americans have a strong sense of pride and patriotism over their country, and as a result claim ownership over the land. Unfortunately, immigrants become targeted through discrimination and the claims that they do not belong in the U.S., nor do they hold any ownership over the U.S. As noted previously, discrimination makes the acculturation process more challenging for immigrants, and can also cause psychological problems for them.

In a study by Rhacel Parreñas (2001), she mentions a theory made by Arlie Hochschild. According to Hochschild, “emotions do not exist in a vacuum. Instead, they exist in the context of social structures in society” (Parreñas 2001:362). Hochschild also explained that emotions are regulated by what is known as “feeling rules,” and are determined by ideologies (Parreñas 2001). In Latino culture, cultural values such as *marianismo* and *machismo* support gender differences in regard to things like family roles and emotions (Sarmiento and Cardemil 2009). Many Latina women stand by the cultural value of *marianismo*, which expects them to be nurturing, caring, self-sacrificing, and constantly prioritizing the needs of your family (Sarmiento and Cardemil 2009). Meanwhile, through the cultural value of *machismo*, Latino men are expected to protect and provide financially for their families (Sarmiento and Cardemil 2009). Essentially, Latino men in Latino culture are these tough, breadwinners, while Latino women in Latino culture are more emotional and family oriented. This seems to match the stereotypical gender roles that are set up in the United States, in which men are also the breadwinners and are less emotional, while women take care of their family and are much more emotional.

Through marianismo and machismo, Latinos have grown up being taught how they should behave and feel emotionally in regard to their gender. When arriving into the United States, Latino immigrants are arriving with these cultural values enforced in them. Latino immigrants dealing with acculturative stress may feel restricted as to how they can handle or deal with it as a result of these values. For instance, Latino men may be less inclined to discuss their feelings amongst friends and family because of machismo. For them, machismo may be a mechanism used to deal with the emotional distress that arises from being far away from their families. Latina women may not be as closed off as the men in regard to discussing their feelings amongst friends and family, because marianismo allows them to be more emotional beings compared to men. Latina women being more family oriented because of marianismo, may appear to be much more affected by family separation than men.

## **Methods**

I conducted interviews with 10 documented Latino immigrants, who live in Westchester County, New York. The ages of the participants ranged from 37 to 58 years old. The participants were acquaintances of my family. The majority of the participants have been living in the United States for 30 years or more. I had hoped to interview more than 10 individuals, however, other potential participants were busy with work or family, which left them with limited free time. All of the participants are from Paraguay, a country located in South America. This was unintentional. The majority of the participants mostly interact with people who are from Paraguay, which is likely the reason as to why this happened. However, Paraguayan migrants are hardly studied. Most of the time, research that is done on Latino immigrants tends to focus on better known Latin American countries. This study provides expansive insight into a lesser known migrant group.

The interviews were semi-structured and one-on-one. All participants consented to having their interviews audio recorded and transcribed. Based on the preference of the participant, the interviews were conducted either in English or Spanish. I acquired my sample of participants through purposive sampling because I was specifically seeking adult, documented Latino immigrants. The participants were contacted through phone calls. When conducting the interviews, I started off by asking them for their age and how long they have been living in the United States. I then asked open-ended questions about their personal experiences in the U.S. up to this point, how well they were able to adjust in the U.S., the biggest challenges they have faced in the U.S., causes of stress for them in the U.S., resources that they have for coping with stress and U.S. culture, who they talk to about their feelings, how they feel emotionally on most days, what do they do to relax or what do they do when they feel stressed, and behavioral changes since arriving in the U.S. I read through the ten interviews thoroughly and identified common themes and patterns. What I was looking to find within their responses were the social factors/stressors that have had the greatest impact on their emotional well-being and incorporation into the United States.

## **Findings & Analysis**

### ***Family Separation***

The majority of my participants expressed that family separation has greatly impacted their emotional well-being in the United States. When participants were asked what has been the biggest challenge or challenges was for them, missing their families or being away from family was their first response. When answering how they feel emotionally on most days, one participant, stated:

“I always miss my family over there, in my country. Sometimes I feel very sad about it, other days I feel a little better, but you always miss your family. It’s hard to not be sad being away from them.”

When asked about what kinds of things or issues give her stress, the participant said that missing her family is a big source of stress for her. She mentioned that when she thinks about her family she feels anxious and begins to bite her nails as a way to calm down. Another participant when asked about what kinds of things or issues give her stress said that her family makes her stressed because they are far away from her. According to her, because they are far away, there is more pressure for her. While she has her own family here, she also has to make sure that her family in her home country are ok as well. A participant had a response similar to this, stating:

“For me it’s family because when you have family over the seas, you can’t see them whenever you want. I can only talk to them on the phone and check on them through that. If something happens to them, I can’t reach them or go to them right away.”

Another participant had also expressed concerns for her family overseas. She said that if someone from her family overseas is sick it makes her stressed because she cannot help them directly. She cannot afford to just pack her things and take a plane to her home country to help them. Instead, she has to stay home and hope for the best. She explained that in those situations she gets very anxious and worried. One participant mentioned that when she first came to the United States, she was very sad and had lost a lot of weight. She greatly missed her family, home country, and friends.

I found that all of the participants expressed similar feelings of missing their families. The participants also expressed that when they initially started living in the United States, they were lonely and highly stressed due to not having the strong structural support they had in their home country. All of the participants shared similar statements about how it took some time to

adjust to life in the United States, and now they are comfortable here. One participant said that initially it was very difficult for her to adapt to the United States because of how much she missed her family, but now she considers the United States to be her “second country.” However, while they have become accustomed to their lives here, all of the participants also stated that being far away from their families is something that they are not able to adjust to completely. One participant said that even though she has been in the United States for over 30 years, the emotional pain of being away from your family never fully goes away. Over time she has gotten better at dealing with it, but it is still a sensitive topic for her. Another participant, who has been living in the United States for 31 years, told me that every New Year’s Eve during festivities, she greatly misses her family overseas and wishes that they could be here to celebrate with her. She especially misses her mother, who she talks to for at least 30 minutes every other day.

Upon arriving in the United States, almost all of the participants had a family member or friends who were already here. Despite not being completely alone, leaving behind loved ones in a country that they had called home was still an emotionally challenging experience for them. The majority of my participants are married, with a few of them having children. Once they were married, they developed their own sense of family which has helped alleviate some of their feelings of sadness. However, while they now have their own families here, they still greatly miss their families overseas. All of the participants said that they keep in contact with family and friends from their home country, ranging from once a week to every day. The participants contact them via phone calls, Facebook, or through a smartphone application called WhatsApp, which allows them to message each other without being charged. This was the opposite of a study that found that stated that immigrants may experience losing connection with family and friends in their home country (Hovey 2000). Despite their new lives in the United States, all



participants have made sure to not lose any connections with their family members and friends overseas.

### *Gender*

Through my interviews I found that the male participants provided shorter, less in-depth responses, compared to the female participants. I also found that the male participants were less emotional when responding to the questions, whereas the female participants were more expressive when responding to the questions. The male participants for the most part, kept a straight face during their interviews. In regard to the responses given by the male participants, this may be due to the cultural value of machismo in Latino culture. A part of machismo expects men to act less emotional than women who are expected to be more emotional beings. One male participant in particular had provided more closed off, less emotional responses than the other males. For instance, when I asked him if he talks to anyone about his feelings, such as friends or family, he simply stated:

“I don’t talk to other people about my feelings. I keep it to myself.”

After that, he shrugged his shoulders and didn’t provide any further information for that question. His response to the question was a clear and strong display of machismo. He may have been using machismo as a coping mechanism. Rather than expressing to others how he is feeling, he wants to display a tough exterior.

When asked about what they do to relax or what they do when they feel stressed, I found that the female participants perform activities that fit the stereotypical female gender role in the United States. They perform activities such as cleaning and organizing their homes, as well as cooking. Studies show that Latina women may embrace the freedom that comes with less traditional roles in the United States (Lorenzo-Blanco and Cortina 2012). However, in this case it

seems that the female participants remain attached to certain traditional roles. This also matches the Latino cultural value of *marianismo*, which expects women to be good housewives. One participant is currently learning to adapt as a single mother, after many years of relying on her husband for help. In response to when I asked her about what kinds of things or issues give her stress, she responded by saying:

“Right now, I am trying to adjust to living on my own because before, I was married and lived with my husband. Now I’m going through a divorce, and I don’t have help from him anymore. When this first happened I was very stressed and I cried so much. Now I’m starting to handle it better, but divorce is still a stressful thing. Some days I feel fine, but other days I feel depressed.”

In relation to her case, studies have shown that Latina women are more negatively by family conflict than Latino men (Sarmiento and Cardemil 2009; Lorenzo-Blanco and Cortina 2012). Before her divorce, she was the nurturer and caretaker of her family, now she also has to take on the certain financial tasks that were performed by her ex-husband. The traditional roles that she had in place in her home are now going to need to be altered in order to work with the changed structure of her family, which is causing stress for her. The male participants shared similar responses when asked about what they do to relax or what they do they do when they feel stressed. Their responses consisted of them watching TV, listening to music, or hanging out with friends.

### ***Language Barrier***

Most of the participants said that the English language was a challenge for them, and that it was a cause of stress. As one participant stated:

“What stressed me before was the language. It’s very difficult to live in one place when you don’t understand what people are saying and you try to understand that. It’s very hard and it really stressed me out when I first came here.”

Another participant said that the biggest pressure for her when she first came here, was to learn English. She stated that it was a lot of pressure for her because in order to be able to communicate with others in the United States and have access to better opportunities, you need to be able to speak English. She could only speak Spanish when she first came to the United States, and was not able to communicate with those who did not speak Spanish. She also became frustrated with herself because it took her longer than she would have liked to, to understand the language. Now, her English skills are much better than they were before, but she still feels unsure or insecure about it at times. A few of the participants had also mentioned that while they have learned English, they are not fluent. They expressed that this results in them having moments of doubt and insecurities, especially when communicating with a native English speaker. For Latino immigrants, English language dominance serves as a cultural anchor for socially constructed meaning that may enable them to join certain social opportunities, that others cannot (Cook et al. 2009). However, despite having moments of uncertainty, none of them feel that it is cause of stress for them now.

The majority of the participants also expressed that they feel the most comfortable when speaking Spanish. When conducting interviews, I found that some of the participants were relieved to know that I offered them the option of conducting their interview in Spanish. In contrast to this, one participant said that for her, learning the language was easy and she had learned it quickly. She was the only participant to state that she had no difficulties in regard to the English language, nor was it a cause of stress for her. Before her interview, when I had asked her whether or not she would like it to be conducted in English or Spanish, she immediately

choose to have it done in English. All of my participants arrived in the United States knowing only how to communicate in Spanish. Most of them taught themselves how to speak English, however, 3 of the participants have attended English learning classes in the past. One participant said that he attended English learning classes at Lehman college a few years after arriving into the United States. Another participant stated:

“Learning the language was difficult. I used to go to community college for classes to help me learn English, but right now, in particular, I learn from my kids.”

The third participant that had mentioned how he was taking English learning classes, is no longer attending them. Due to his current job he does not have the time to attend them. Once more space opens up for him at his job, he will look into taking classes once a week on a day he can ask to take off. While these participants had the opportunity to attend classes to improve their English skills, it's possible that other participants do not have the time to attend classes. Instead, they rely on teaching themselves English. One participant had explained to me that she had taught herself English by paying attention to what people were saying around her when she would leave her home.

### ***Family/Friends/Community Support***

The majority of my participants stated that their friends and/or family help them to cope with stress and the culture in the United States. All of the participants who stated this claimed that communicating with their friends about their feelings is very helpful. The majority of my participants also mentioned family as a major source of support. One participant said that hanging out with their friends helps them feel better when they are stressed. He explained that when he is with them he feels relaxed and he is able to discuss things that are not just work related. At his job he just talks to his coworkers about mostly work related things. When asked

about what kinds of resources she has for coping with stress, one participant responded that her family, especially her sister in law helps her a lot. She stated that her sister in law is her main supporter in the United States. Another participant said that she mostly talks to her sister about her feelings. She feels the most comfortable talking to her when she is stressed or anxious. One participant said:

“I talk to my friends and my family. When I sometimes have a “blue” day, I talk to my family and friends. They listen and they help me figure out things.”

Three participants mentioned that that they talk to their spouse about their feelings more than they do with other family members or friends. They find that they are more comfortable speaking to them for emotional support. Another two participants included religion as a resource for coping with stress and U.S. culture. Both of the participants shared similar responses. They explained that they are members of a religious group, called La Virgen de Caacupé, in their church. In that group, they are amongst their friends that they have known for many years and they are able to discuss what is going on in their lives, as well as what is going on in their home country. Both participants appeared happy to talk about their religious group. As one of the participants stated:

“Going to church, you find people who are from the same country as you, you are able to speak in your native language. Everyone talks about their country. In that moment, one is living in or remembering things from their country and that helps a lot. It’s the same thing for my group, La Virgen de Caacupé. We are all from Paraguay, and we have known each other for many years.”

Both participants stated that when they are with their group, they feel happy and relaxed. For Latina women, religious services and participation can be a positive way of handling psychological distress (Bekteshi and van Hook 2014). Two participants had also mentioned that

they had spoken with a therapist, however, they emphasized talking with their friends and family about their feelings more. When discussing the culture in the United States compared to the culture in their home country, all of my participants shared similar statements that the culture in the United States is much colder and distant than the culture in their home country. All participants said that in their culture and communities, everyone is “warm” with each other. The people are much friendlier and everyone from their communities have known each other their whole lives. As one participant stated:

“For family, Latinos we are a united family. We are close with each other. American people are less, they are more cold. There, you feel more amongst family, more comfortable. It took me a while to get used to the coldness here, and for a while I felt out of place and sad because of that.”

This was not surprising to me, because the cultural value of familismo is highly important to Latinos. Familismo consists of positive family relationships, strong family unity, interdependence, as well as social support (Lorenzo-Blanco and Cortina 2012). While Latinos share strong bonds with each other through familismo, the culture in the United States does not share that value. As one participant mentioned, it is a different atmosphere here. If you go to a community in South America, there is an obvious change in atmosphere.

### ***Job Issues***

Issues relating to work/employment was a cause of stress for 6 of the participants. For Latino immigrants in the United States, finding employment may be difficult due to a lack of English skills or discrimination. While all 6 of the participants stated that difficulties with language was an issue for them in regard to finding employment, 3 of the participants also

mentioned that discrimination was an issue in the workplace. One participant, when asked about what kind of things or issues give him stress, responded by saying:

“Problems with work give sometimes gives me stress. I work in landscaping, and sometimes I feel as I’m being treated differently at my job because I am not white and my English is not that good. When things are not going well at my job I feel a little stressed. Sometimes I feel like I am not taken seriously.”

Perceived feelings of inferiority and discrimination Another participant said that while working, he can sometimes feel the discrimination towards Latinos. He also said that he has had to deal with customers and bosses who have treated him poorly due to his non-fluent English, or simply because they could tell that he was Latino based on his appearance. A female participant explained that she is a house cleaner and has faced discrimination in the past because of it. She was not a house cleaner in her home country, so not only was it hard for her to adjust to that job, she was also treated poorly at times by her employers. She had told me:

“ When I had first started cleaning houses, I had worked for employers who were not kind to me. I felt discriminated by them. That gave me stress. Their actions, and what they would say to my face. They would treat me like I was nothing because I cleaned houses.”

While telling me this, I could detect sadness in her voice. She told me that she became a house cleaner because she had no other work experience and limited English skills. This takes me to a study that mentions that lack of English skills prevents Latina immigrants access to employment opportunities and obstructs the acculturation process for them (Bekteshi and van Hook 2014).

### ***Behavioral Changes***

Since arriving in the United States, most of the participants found that the way that they feel and behave has changed in comparison to how they were before arriving in the United States. I found that all of these participants shared similar responses in that their feelings and behavior changing was a result of having to adjust to the culture in the United States. One participant stated that her behavior has changed as a result of having to manage two cultures, the culture from her country of origin and the culture here. A participant told me that before coming to the United States, she was more carefree, but during her time here, she has become more reserved. Mostly all of the participants came to the United States when they were much younger. Almost all of the participants have been in the United States for 30 or more years, with only one being here for 3 years. A few of these participants explained that because they came here when they were younger, their behavior has changed throughout the years while adjusting. This relates to a study that stated that as immigrants grow older and spend more time in their new country, they may have the chance to construct a strong support system, as well as develop the necessary coping skills to adjust to the cultural change (Bekteshi and van Hook 2014). Some of the participants stated that they had to mature faster in order to adjust to the culture. When asked if he had found any behavior changes in himself, a participant said:

“Yes, I have noticed that I have changed a lot. I have a lot more responsibilities, so emotionally I had to become more serious. I think a part of me is the same as when I lived in Paraguay, but because of the experiences that I have had living here, I have had to become someone more serious.”

The participants stated to have started to have a higher level of feelings such as stress, anxiety, and depression only after arriving to the United States. Before coming here, they did not have those feelings as often or at all. However, despite developing those feelings in the United States and finding adjusting to the culture difficult at first, most of the participants have found



their personal experiences here to be good. One participant was unsure if she had felt the way that she did before coming to the United States because she has been here for over 30 years. However, after thinking it over for a moment, she said that she believes that she did not feel as sad or emotional as she did in her home country. She thinks that she may have really started to feel that way here.

## **Conclusion**

Collectively the responses demonstrated varying psychological effects in regard to family and support, family separation, English language skills, and discrimination in the workplace. After conducting the interviews, what I can conclude is that family separation, as well as family and social support, were the biggest factors for them psychologically and their incorporation into the U.S. Based on the responses of the participants it was clear that family and social support were highly important to them. When dealing with stress or wanting to discussing their feelings, almost all of the participants leaned towards family or friends for guidance. It appeared that having someone to count on was very helpful in reducing or relieving their feelings of stress. The emotional bond that they had with their family and friends was very clear. Family separation was found to be greatly difficult for them to cope with and would result in high levels of negative psychological effects. Even after many years, family separation is still a source of strong source of stress for participants because of the bond that they share with their loved ones overseas. While English language skills and discrimination were found to be a source of stress for them, they were not nearly as significant psychologically as family and social support, and family separation. Discrimination appeared to only be an issue in the workplace. However, it could be that participants wish to not discuss their experiences regarding discrimination because it causes them discomfort. Issues regarding English skills were more of a temporary problem then a

continuous one for them. Meanwhile, religious involvement appeared to not be as crucial for them as mentioned in my literature review. However, for the participants that discussed it, their religious group was a source of social support for them. For them, being around others who share the same background makes them feel relaxed and at home. Behaviorally and emotionally, participants have noticed obvious changes about themselves throughout the time that they have been here, especially in a negative sense. Since some of them came here when they were younger, their behavior “evolved” here.

Since research provides little focus on Paraguayan migrants, my study has provided insight into an a lesser known and discussed community. My study provides some insight into the levels of and sorts of psychological effects that they experience throughout their incorporation into the United States. It also provides some insight into which social factors/stressors have had the greatest impact on them psychologically throughout their acculturation process. However, because my participants consisted of only ten individuals, I also cannot generalize my findings. A larger sample size would be needed to give the findings more credibility. In future studies, I would like to see further attention placed on the psychological effects of acculturative stress on Paraguayan migrants.

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