

Barriers Experienced by Mexican Immigrants: Implications for Educational Achievement and Mental Health

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Abstract

The adversities faced by Latina/o individuals and their families in the U.S. negatively impact educational outcomes as well as their mental and physical health. These adversities are often related to immigration status and acculturation and include difficulties with immigration, language barriers, and discrimination. Given that recent immigrants often experience many barriers, it is important to understand their perceptions of these barriers and their impacts on their lives and educational opportunities. We investigated barriers (social, individual or environmental phenomena which hinder or restrict normal developmental achievement and educational attainment) in the lives of six, first-generation Mexican immigrants. Participants engaged in one to two hour semi-structured interviews reflecting on their perceptions of stressors, motivation and success in life. Using thematic analysis and grounded theory, the barriers identified include cultural, sociopolitical and social factors such as: life circumstances or cognitive barriers, barriers caused by safety concerns, acculturation or the immigration process, language barriers, and lack of resources. Implications for educators and mental health professionals are discussed.

Introduction

Mexican immigrants to the U.S. make up 32% of all foreign-born residents of the U.S. and 66% of all Latina/o immigrants. Compared to other immigrant groups in the U.S., Mexican immigrants are younger, have lower education levels, and have higher poverty and unemployment rates (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009). There were approximately 11.5 million undocumented immigrants in the U.S. as of 2012 with 6.3 million being of Mexican origin. Children constitute approximately one in six of the undocumented immigrant population (Passel & Cohn, 2009). Almost half of the undocumented immigrants in the U.S. do not have a high school diploma (Fortuny, Capps, & Passel, 2007). Immigrant populations encounter multiple adversities, including immigration itself, markedly limited educational opportunities, discrimination, acculturation difficulties, language barriers, cultural obstacles, economic insecurity, and other systemic oppression (Cervantes, Padilla, & Salgado de Snyder, 1991).

Immigrant individuals experience discrimination at school, at work, with friends and neighbors, and in public settings. Encounters with discrimination have been found to be emotionally, psychologically, and physically harmful in multiple studies (Alamilla, Kim, & Lam, 2010) and to affect daily life such that adults may not want to go to work or pursue an education, or children may avoid school. Acculturative stressors involve stress in adjusting

to schools, neighborhoods, religious communities, and/or work places, as well as possible intergenerational conflicts (Portes & Rumbaut, 1990). Language barriers can affect access to education, communication with children's school personnel, range of job opportunities or job advancement possibilities, and access to healthcare services. A shortage of trained bilingual school personnel and mental health service providers contributes to the difficulties experienced by monolingual immigrants (Partida, 2007). In addition, more Latina/o immigrants (18.6%) live in poverty than U.S. natives (12.5%) (U.S. Census, 2009); living at the poverty level entails financial stress, limited educational opportunities, less time to spend with family or attending to personal needs, lacking insurance, and living in communities with high crime rates (Dohrenwend, 2000).

Stressors encountered in the U.S. are often different than those faced in the immigrant's native country. Efforts to cope with these stressors while simultaneously dealing with everyday life challenges may create a very high level of strain, which has been associated with depression, anxiety disorders, and suicide (Lefcourt, 1989). Such stress and illness inevitably impacts educational outcomes. Specifically, studies investigating Latina/o dropout have found it associated with lower socioeconomic status, school disengagement, and early pregnancy (Feliciano, 2001). School dropout has been linked to later life problems, including increased adult violence, higher unemployment, and lower wages (Laird, DeBell, & Chapman, 2006). Given the marked negative impact, it is beneficial for educators and mental health professionals alike to better understand the barriers faced by Mexican immigrants to the U.S., so these stressors can be addressed preventively, before they take a toll on educational achievement or lead to psychological problems.

This qualitative study explores the barriers faced by six Mexican immigrants to a large city in the Midwestern U.S. Through analysis of semi-structured interviews, themes of shared and unique barriers relevant to education and mental health emerged.

Method

Participants

Selection. Dependable community contacts (i.e., individuals respected in their communities and holding positions of leadership) referred potential participants for the study. Potential participants had to be first-generation immigrants to the U.S. from Mexico, at least 18 years of age, not currently experiencing severe psychological disorders, and successfully meeting developmental gains that were expected within their communities in at least one of three domains (i.e., work, family, or community) (see Morgan, 2007). Consistent with grounded theory methodology, participants were recruited until saturation was reached (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Description. Participants were six Mexican immigrants raised in various Mexican states, four men and two women, ranging in age from 22 to 35 years old. Time since immigration ranged from 2 to 17 years. All names were changed to protect the participants' identities.

Daniel. Daniel is a 22-year-old seminarian who came to the United States the first time through the services of a *coyote*, but returned two years prior to the interview with a student visa and studied theology and English in a Catholic program that trains Spanish speaking priests to serve the local Latina/o population.

Alice. Alice was in her early twenties and a recent graduate of a large, urban Catholic university. She was born in the United States but moved to Mexico (her parents' homeland) at age two. She and her parents returned to the U.S. when she was a teenager so that her father could earn money toward retirement. The family stayed so that she could attend college. She was unemployed and lived with her parents at the time of the interview.

Andrés. Andrés was a 20-year old seminarian participating in the same program as Daniel and living in the same residential facility. He moved to the U.S. from central Mexico three and a half years before to participate

in the religious training program. He also initially traveled to the U.S. illegally, but then studied under a student visa. He had older brothers living in the U.S., but most of his family members remained in Mexico.

Pablo. Pablo was a 22-year-old seminarian who moved to the United States four years before. He had no family in the U.S. and stated that he moved as a way to “learn about life.”

Geraldo. Geraldo was a 29-year-old who came to the U.S. for the first time without documentation 11 years ago, and who moved permanently to the U.S. eight years before the interview. He migrated to raise money and send it home to his family who lived in a small rural town. He lived with his male partner of five years and worked as a cook in a restaurant. He lived near a large extended network of family members from his Mexican hometown.

Sandra. Sandra was a 35-year old woman who moved to the U.S. 17 years before the interview. She left Mexico as a single mother of two sons, to escape an abusive relationship. At the time of the interview, she was married to another Mexican immigrant and had a third son. She worked as a waitress, and planned to move back to Mexico with her husband once retired.

Instruments

Qualitative data for the study was collected through semi-structured interviews and participant observation conducted by the researchers.

Semi-structured interview. The interview consisted of open-ended questions on daily life and the difficulties encountered and descriptions of critical incidents where participants were able to overcome adversity.

Observation notes. The Researchers made participant observation notes as journal entries after attending public events in the environments of the participants. Notes were used both to develop cases and to provide context for interpretation of results.

Procedures

Potential participants were contacted after referral by the community contact. Individuals who agreed to participate were given information about the study and scheduled for a one to two hour interview.

Interviews were conducted in English or Spanish, depending upon preference, at a convenient community location chosen by the participant. Trained translators were used for Spanish interviews, when needed. Written materials in Spanish were translated and then back translated to ensure accuracy of meaning (Marin & Marin, 1991).

Researcher observations included visiting a parish and watching one of the seminarians conduct his work. Observations were also made in and around the work or home environments of other participants.

Transcription of interviews. Interview sessions were audio-taped with participants' consent (all agreed) and then transcribed. Spanish interviews were translated into English by one of three translators. If there was uncertainty on the part of a translator, a second translator was consulted to reach consensus (McGorry, 2000).

Data analysis. Interviews, transcriptions, and researcher observations provided data triangulation and served to increase the quality of the inquiry (Creswell, 1998), while using thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) and grounded theory methodology (Straus & Corbin, 1998). Two researchers independently reviewed the data, and then came together to reach consensus on themes and their definitions. The Barriers identified in each case were noted and recorded in the database. Barriers were related to any life achievement, education, and/or mental

health. When a case was determined to exemplify Barriers but did not fit into previously determined categories, subcategories, or tertiary categories, the categories were adapted until all identified cases of Barriers were accommodated. The end result was a coding scheme broad enough to encompass all cases from all participants.

Results

Themes of Barriers emerged as several categories: Individual Barriers (life circumstances and daily routines) Systemic Barriers (micro-systems, government, and threats to safety), Cross-cultural Barriers (acculturation, immigration process), and Economic Barriers (lack of money or resources) (See Appendix A for definitions). Each type of Barrier is discussed below with examples.

Individual Barriers

Individual Barriers, or those barriers related to life circumstances, often created situations that made it difficult to consider or continue education. For example, Sandra, who wished to find new opportunities in the U.S., including furthering her education, discussed the following Life Circumstance when asked about experiences she had had where she found the strength to survive or “keep going”:

Sandra: *El coyote trato también* (the coyote tried also) and I say, you know, “Hey, I’m gonna pay. Why are you like... I mean, like what do you want?” (laughs nervously). And he tried, to like “Hey, stay with me here in California.” “Stay with me and my sisters.” And of course they tried to take ... aa...

Interviewer: Advantage?

Sandra: Exactly. And I’m not stupid, you know. Come on, I was like 17 years old, so I don’t think that I was...

Sandra stated that she thought about this experience frequently and the memory disturbed her, at the same time as it reminded her of her own strength.

Three participants described instances of Daily Routine Barriers. All reflected tedious jobs and problematic schedules, which particularly interfered with materializing educational aspirations. For example, Daniel discussed his life when he first immigrated to the U.S. and took two jobs. He attempted to go to school, but encountered great difficulties:

I tried to arrange like a student visa to try to get into school again, through the university, but I didn’t get any help on that. None of the universities would even recognize any of the requisite courses I had taken, I wasn’t even able to get the preliminary exams to even get into school... I realized that I needed to get a job just to survive so I attained a job at this company (company name) where I was a cashier there and worked for several months.

Daniel further described his daily schedule, which made it impossible for him to attend school:

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Systemic Barriers

Half of the participants discussed systemic barriers that were due to Micro-Systems such as work, gangs,

or family. For example, Geraldo discussed the expectation that when he moved to the U.S., with the help of several cousins, he would live with them and contribute to the rent so that money could be saved and sent back to their family in Mexico. He also planned to attend classes and work. However, he found that the cousins often drank too much alcohol and that he did not like living in that type of environment. He was faced with the conflict of the familial expectation to contribute to the rent while at the same time taking care of his own needs. In this case, the necessity of living in crowded quarters with his family became the barrier to his achievements.

Three participants discussed examples that involved Societal Conventions, which got in the way of an individual receiving help, support, or education. One example is the societal stigma of seeing a psychologist. Geraldo described feeling he needed to see someone for help when he arrived in the U.S. He felt that seeing a psychologist might give him the support he needed to pursue his goals. Yet having to deal with his friends' and families' negative reactions was a major deterrent: "...they think that going to see a psychologist is for people that are crazy. And that is not true." Another case of Societal Conventions as barriers involved an immigrant not being initially open to customs in his new culture. Andrés describes this feeling and subsequent realization:

Ah, so it is likely many of us (immigrants) don't sympathize sharing with other types of people ... but then I realized that it was a matter of little by little entering to the (U.S.) culture and knowing about the different activities that are available here.

As Andrés was able to become more "open" to different types of people, he felt he could avail himself better of the job and education possibilities in the U.S.

Government Restrictions were illustrated in an instance where the U.S. government did not accept professional training received at a Mexican institution. This affected how a hard-earned education was valued in the new culture and exemplifies another challenge within education for immigrants.

Threats to Safety were discussed by two participants. The threats involved neighborhood gangs affecting family safety. Yolanda described being afraid that her son would join gangs in her neighborhood and worrying about "not knowing what he is doing" when he is out at night. She was afraid that his involvement in gangs would hamper his education and ability to "make something" of himself. On a related note, Pablo indicated fear of gangs and drug activity and the tendency to isolate himself as protection: "Who knows, there's too much... One comes from over there and does not know many things. When one arrives here, we are fearful because there are too many gangs, and lots of drugs. So one is fearful. One arrives and has a tendency to enclose oneself." This also hindered his activities and possibilities for self-advancement such as extra classes, friendships and other social connections.

Cross-Cultural Barriers

Cross-Cultural barriers concerned mostly the stress associated with acculturation, or the difficulties that result from attempting to interact within two systems that have competing values and/or cultures. Others were about discrimination faced by immigrants, and the process of realizing this, such as Alice discussing an event that she did not want to disclose but saw as racism:

I just remember once at school it was something that happened to me and I didn't want to see it as racism, but a friend told me, "You know what? I don't want to be mean or sound bad, but I do think that it was some type of racism." I didn't take it too personally, because what could I do anyway?

Pablo also discussed a feeling of being discriminated against at some workplaces: "Because in other places where I have worked before, there is sort of an oppression over Mexicans, there is something against the

Hispanic, even if it is from a Hispanic toward a Hispanic.”

Other cases were specifically about acculturation-related difficulties in not knowing the dominant language, for example, when Alice discussed her parents not knowing English:

So, yeah, I think the language barrier is (there)...and I see it with my parents. My Mom, she's willing to learn the language. She takes classes and listens to the radio or the T.V., but my Dad is the opposite to her. He really doesn't want to learn the language. He's always like Spanish channels, Spanish radio, talking to people. He understands the language but he sometimes doesn't quite really understand everything. He's like, "No, I don't need to learn it, I'm going back to Mexico. I don't need it." That's the way he puts it, "I don't need it." But yeah, he does need it. But on the other side, he has my brother, he has me, he's like, "You go, you do it. You tell them." So that's the reason he doesn't want to do it. But I know it can be stressful to him because sometimes when he gets mail and he doesn't understand or when people talk to him he gets a little nervous maybe. And I've seen it in people on the street, you will see like people talking to a Hispanic woman or man... and both sides get really stressed because one is trying to explain and the other is not understanding. So that's something that keeps people really stressed, like, "What should I do now?"

Alice further discusses the language barrier and how it affects her: "Like even now, I'm sure you can notice that my accent is still there and sometimes I have troubles with the language. So sometimes I'm like, oh, how can I say it?" Similarly, Pablo discussed this idea and how it became a barrier to his education:

What causes me stress is, there are too many things that I don't understand about the U.S. ... When I am studying, there are too many things that I don't understand, and that stresses me because there are too many complexities in English.

Other specific stressors of acculturation, such as lack of family time due to having to work a lot to make ends meet in the new culture, were also identified. Alice discussed the difference in American and Mexican work values and the stress involved with this:

I don't know if they really have the time to socialize a lot. I think that is really difficult. I know back home in Mexico, the people socialize a lot more than they do here, so that's something that is different from here. Because even though we're Hispanics and we're coming from the same country, we don't do the same activities that we do back there. I think that the social life is suffering a bit more here compared to back in Mexico, my country of origin... I think that [immigrants] are more concentrated [on] just working hard. And then their social life will be just at the end of the week. Just spend some time with the family. That's something that we are always looking for – trying to spend time with the family. I think that here time has been reduced – a lot.

Four participants discussed barriers involving the Immigration Process itself. Most of these cases had to do with difficulties associated with one's legal status, and a few had to do with lack of support in the immigration process. For example, one participant described the difficulties of crossing the U.S.-Mexican border:

There were thirty people. And it was true that there were a lot of problems, there were many risks. It rained a river at night and in the day we could not walk. We would use the morning, like six in the morning to nine in the morning. Then day would come and we had to camp or cover ourselves because of so many helicopters that were flying around... And you can hear when they pass by in front and you... and you simply sleep in the day and in the afternoon. When the sun is down, again you walk until ten, twelve at night and then sleep... And also the animals were

a problem, snakes... You would talk amongst yourselves or would stay quiet. The person who helped us cross would tell you to be quiet. Maybe because immigration was near or could hear us if we were talking. So, you had to go with caution. And it was an experience that I dealt with twice.

Such experiences were endured with the hope of securing a better life for one's self and family, but many times the reality of the experience had to be dealt with physically and psychologically before the person could even hope to begin to achieve what he/she migrated to attain.

Economic Barriers

Economic Barriers were discussed by most participants and were all associated with not having money or resources to achieve goals, such as Geraldo discussing his living conditions upon arrival in the United States: "When I got here ah...I came with a dream to make money. When I got here we lived in an apartment with two bedrooms and twelve people." He noted how this interfered with his aspirations of being an educated businessman. Often such accommodations disrupted his studying and advancing his English skills. For example, Pablo described the primary objective of working to raise money in order to attain his goals of "having and being more." He acknowledged a significant strain: "you won't find anything for free here... you will have to be fighting constantly in order to make ends meet." He further discussed the general lack of opportunities and the effect on immigrant individuals: "I think they are motivated, but sometimes there is no time, all is not available and also the opportunities are not there. Sometimes there is no other way, the only thing left is to struggle."

Discussion

The stories of the Mexican immigrant participants interviewed in this study illustrate many of the barriers faced on a daily basis by individuals in this population. These barriers clearly interfere with educational goals and employment aspirations, as well as with general wellbeing. Acculturation barriers were the most frequently cited type of barriers, which reflects the prevalence that the issue of adjustment to another culture takes in the lives of immigrants. Other barriers had to do with the immigration process, and reflected, in many cases, difficulties associated with being undocumented, including various mental health results, which underscores the psychological impact of immigration and the importance of the coping strategies used for maintaining mental health. As seen in the examples from participants, such mental health impact can interfere greatly with accomplishing desired goals or "dreams." This is consistent with literature showing the relation between stressors and various mental health disorders (Lefcourt, 1989). In turn, such mental health issues can have great impact on educational achievement (Bradley, Doolittle, & Bartolotta, 2008; Carbonell, 2005; Constantine, Gloria, & Barón, 2006).

Discussion of language barriers by participants emphasized the limitation placed on individuals once they arrive in the U.S. if he/she is not fluent in English. These barriers can be particularly important in educational settings and society at large, where, given dwindling resources for public education and initiatives against bilingual education, children or adults can be limited in their achievement possibilities, thus curtailing further opportunities and social mobility (Partida, 2007; Tashakkori, Ochoa, & Kemper, 1999). During early education, limited English proficiency in many U.S. schools may lead to school drop out and being held back academically (Abedi, 2002; Artiles, Trent, & Palmer, 2004), and may have emotional ramifications such as feelings of inadequacy, lack of acceptance, and social isolation due to discrimination and stigmatization (Dawson & Williams, 2008). In fact, language proficiency has been found to be a major determinant in academic difficulty as well as in teacher perception of the student's social, behavioral and academic abilities (Bohon, Macpherson, & Atilas, 2005).

Participants' experiences of discrimination and racism reported in this study echo findings for immigrant populations in general, where discrimination and racism are ever-present stressors in everyday life. Reports by study participants parallel findings in the extant literature of discrimination's detrimental effect on educational achievement (Benner & Graham, 2011; Dawson & Williams, 2008). Economic Barriers discussed by participants reflect the findings in the literature on poverty and low socioeconomic status as one of the significant challenges for Mexican immigrants (Census, 2009; Dohrenwend, 2000).

In many accounts, the barriers discussed by participants led to a temporary or complete halt in their educational processes. Participant stories underscored the impact that this type of educational discontinuation has had on later life options, a finding corroborated by correlational studies of dropout with later negative life outcomes (Laird, DeBell, & Chapman, 2006).

Given the links of many barriers to external or internalized oppression, it remains important for educators and mental health professionals who wish to promote educational achievement, resilience, and mental health in the face of such barriers to continue to advocate for social justice, or “Full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs” (Bell, 1997, p. 3) (e.g., see Life Circumstances barriers in Table 1).

Several factors have been shown to be linked to mediation of such barriers. For example, social support (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004; Fairbrother, 2008) and problem-focused coping (Pascoe & Richman, 2009), academic motivation (Alfaro, Umaña-Taylor, Gonzales-Backen, Bamaca, & Zeiders, 2009), the ability to create meaning in adversity, and contribution to the community (Eccles & Appleton, 2002) help foster greater wellbeing despite adversities. Educators are in a unique role to facilitate some of these conditions, either directly, as advocates (Bailey, Getch, & Chen-Hayes, 2003; Toporek, 2008), or by helping students to become connected with necessary resources. Helping to facilitate such skills and conditions helps to “even the playing field” for the students and thus contributes to the achievement of social justice.

Understanding more thoroughly the personal and societal impact of the barriers like those highlighted in this study is crucial in designing educational opportunities, mental health services, and policy concerning this growing segment of our population. It also seems important to recognize that in many cases this is a group of individuals self-selected to face hardships “head-on,” in that they often chose to immigrate, knowing the hardships it can entail. As not everyone is able to make this decision, it could be that this group of individuals is better able to deal with barriers than most. Although not the focus of this article, participants often mentioned methods of dealing with the adversities that exemplified their resilience. For example, it was common to rely on familial support or hope to get through hardships. Knowing possible ways of coping commonly utilized by Mexican immigrants may help educators to facilitate strengths in the Mexican immigrant students that they work with.

Limitations and Implications

One limitation of this study was the cultural and linguistic differences between the researchers and the participants. It is important to note that these differences may have influenced the creation of the coding scheme as well as its application. While the researchers tried to be aware of such influences to the highest degree possible, it is impossible that all such influences were removed from the study design, data collection, or data analysis and interpretation. The researchers believe, however, that the benefit obtained by the richness of the data resulting from this methodology far outweighs its limitations.

The authors believe that results from this study may be used to inform education, general service programs, mental health services, and public policy and advocacy initiatives for Mexican immigrants. For example, schools must welcome and orient newcomers, facilitate English skills of students in need, connect families with neighborhood resources, and celebrate the unique contributions made by newcomers. Schools should also utilize various programs designed to address environmental concerns (e.g., discrimination and racism) (Leos & Saavedra, 2010) and prepare school personnel to attend to the distinct needs experienced by Mexican immigrants. This may entail individualized training or group dynamics training on diversity and social justice advocacy. Additionally, Mexican immigrant students and families should be made aware of any community resources or support systems that may aid them in coping with the challenges they have, and will continue to experience in navigating their adjustment to a new culture. Detailed and specific knowledge about the barriers faced by this population highlights the need for continued efforts in alleviating barriers, or, at least, helping to foster means to cope with the challenges of migrating to a new land. In this “Nation of Immigrants,” such an endeavor is paramount.

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Appendix A

Coding Scheme for Barriers

Primary Category

Subcategory

Tertiary Category

Barriers – A social, individual or environmental phenomenon that hinders or restricts normal developmental achievement

Individual – Idiosyncratic conditions that affect only a few people or individuals

Life circumstances – Specific experiences or life event unique to an individual

Daily routines – Tedious or repetitive actions specific to an individual

Cognitive – Internal judgment causing distress, general stress

Systemic – Rules, regulations or circumstances that affect groups of individuals operating within the same society

Societal Convention – Values, practices or role expectations perceived to be held of a broad social environment

Micro-systems – Systems which perpetuate role expectations for a small group or organization, such as a family, community, school, or work environment

Threat to Safety – Perceived or actual endangerment in the environment, either physical or psychological (drugs, violence, gang activity, etc.)

Cross-cultural – Rules, regulations or circumstances that affect groups of individuals operating within or between multiple societies

Acculturation – Difficulties that result from attempting to interact within two systems that have competing values and/or cultures, including racism and discrimination

Immigration Process – Difficulties arising from the experiences of exiting one country and entering another, with the intention to live and/or work for an extended period of time (includes illegal work status)

Economic – Production, development or management of material wealth that is either actual or perceived to be inadequate

Resources – Lack or difficulty in accessing goods, services, or information

Money – General depression of monetary resources, impoverished environment, or difficulty meeting basic needs. This includes the inability to find a way to make money or wages that are perceived as insufficient.