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Trauma Exposure During Immigration: Important Considerations for Professionals Working with Latina Immigrant Populations

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Abstract

Latina immigrants represent a population that has been historically under-served and exploited (Ojeda, Flores, Meza & Morales, 2011). Therefore, it is the responsibility of professionals that work with this vulnerable group to not further victimize or misuse research participants. This exploratory paper summarizes available literature relating to trauma experienced by Latina immigrants during migration and provides guidance for researchers and other professionals who work with Latina immigrant populations. It is important to note here, however, that the authors of this paper are not suggesting that severe trauma is necessarily a part of all Latina immigrant migration experiences. Rather, that they emphasize the point that this population is especially vulnerable. It is important that researchers and professionals working with Latina immigrants consider this topic.

Keywords: Latino immigrants, migration, immigrant trauma, immigrant research

Trauma Exposure During Latina Immigrant Migration: An Overview

Scholars around the globe have reported noteworthy statistics about the prevalence of traumatic experiences among asylum seeking immigrants. The Association for Victimes de la Represion en Exil reported that 20% of those applying for asylum in France had previously experienced torture (Reid & Strong 1987, cited in: Shalev, Yehuda & McFarlane 2000), as had 18% of 2,099 asylum applicants in Quebec (Tohneau et al. 1990, cited in: Shalev, Yehuda & McFarlane 2000) and 26% of such individuals in Sydney, Australia (Silove et al. 1993, cited in: Shalev, Yehuda & McFarlane 2000). In the United States, very little research has been conducted of immigrants seeking asylum, but some studies cite that up to 75% of Latina research participants from Central America/Mexico report exposure to trauma (Kaltman et al., 2010). Additionally, traumatic experiences while crossing the US/Mexico border were found to be “common stressors” among Latina research participants (Shattell et al., 2008). Such experiences include: 1) exposure to political violence; 2) sexual trauma; and 3) witnessing violence (Fortuna, Porche & Alegria, 2008). The phenomenon of National Security Rape, when members of the US National Guard rape women at the Mexico/US border, has become disturbingly common in recent years as well. Women often prepare for such an incident by taking birth control before migration (Falcón 2006).

Outcomes of traumatic experiences include psychological adjustment disorders, anxiety, depression, hopelessness, and terrifying episodes in which the trauma is re-experienced. Further, these negative psychological outcomes not only affect the women who endure them, but are also evident in less effective parenting styles leading to inhibited development of their children (Forogue & Muller 2012). Thus, investigating this issue is of concern for current and future members of the Latino community including immigrants, their families, and their children.

Immigration Trauma in Research: Avoiding Re-Traumatization

In light of the severe impact that trauma experience can have on individuals, researchers working with Latina immigrants should be sensitive to this concern regarding the individuals that they recruit. Research suggests that recounting stories of trauma in an insensitive setting can be re-traumatizing to the individual (Falcón, 2006), and traumatic exposure is often not disclosed to a researcher, even in a study where this is the focus (Kaltman et. al, 2011). Trauma may be associated with immigration in general, thus, describing the migration process to researchers may be traumatizing. Researchers that are responsible for recruiting Latina immigrants must be aware of the possible trauma experiences of such individuals and tailor research protocol accordingly, especially if the project includes a focus on or questions about the participants’ migration experience.

To avoid traumatizing research participants, researchers should continue to educate themselves on this issue and seek out training on how to appropriately confront disclosure of traumatic experiences if they arise. Further, researchers should take extra care not to place undue stress on research participants, as they may already be experiencing heightened levels of stress in coping with trauma outcomes.

Crisis Intervention & Trauma: Working with Latina Immigrant Survivors

Given the extreme trauma that may emerge when working with Latina immigrants, it is imperative that professionals at all training levels understand how to support and effectively communicate with trauma survivors. There are various psychological services offered to trauma survivors (e.g. survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault survivors) however, an increase of mental health services and advocacy agencies is needed. According to Ullman and Townsend (2007), “the ability to access support services is the starting point for victims to get formal help in coping with [trauma].” An increase in services is needed for survivors to receive treat-

ment and support in order foster their coping process is essential”.

When interacting and working with Latina immigrant sexual assault/trauma survivors, it is important to incorporate aspects of cultural identity and values (Williams, 1984; Lira, Koss, Russo, 1999; Lefley et al., 1993). One important aspect for professionals to keep in mind is the historical discrimination and disadvantages that Latinos face in the United States. Klevens (2007) states that the structural disadvantages of immigrant status and the socioeconomic status of Latinos shapes their identity and view of the world. Professionals must not ignore trauma that may emerge due to immigration and discrimination but rather incorporate these views into a counseling session.

Not only is it vital for professionals to be culturally sensitive towards the needs of trauma survivors, but also aware of their own health and mental exhaustion. Numerous studies have proven that counselors and advocates who work with trauma survivors (e.g. sexual and domestic violence) are likely to experience burnout and vicarious trauma (Baird & Jenkins, 2003; Ghahramanlou & Brodbeck, 2000; Schauben & Frazier, 1995; Wasco & Campbell, 2002).

Cultural sensitivity and knowledge to avoid unintentional re-victimization of the Latina trauma survivors is also necessary for professionals and graduate students in training. Traumatic experiences and negative mental-health outcomes of such experiences, including Rape Trauma Syndrome and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (Jackson-Cherry & Erford, 2010) are a health concern for Latina immigrants. This may result from traumatic experiences that occurred during the immigration process (from mother country into the United States) and/or once they have settled into the new country. Sexual violence (e.g. rape and coercion) has been consistently related to deleterious psychological health outcomes. When specifically speaking of rape and trauma, Testa and Messman-Moore (2009) found that rape accounted for greater severity in post traumatic symptoms. Although the rate of rape is increasing at an alarming rate worldwide, women are particularly

vulnerable while crossing the Mexican-U.S. border. According to Olivera (2006), this may be a result of the [Mexico] country’s current crisis of governability, internal security, and respect for human rights. With the rate of rapes increasing amongst Latina immigrants, and the mental health effects of rape and trauma being very detrimental to an individual’s well being, there is a need for the psychological treatment for victims.

Conclusion

The authors of this publication aim to raise awareness of the negative mental health outcomes that result from traumatic experiences, and to emphasize the importance of cultural considerations for counselors when working with Latina Immigrant trauma survivors. The process of immigration does not necessarily cause traumatic experiences, but because Latina immigrants are at a higher risk for such experiences, it is essential that professionals working with them take into account how the experience may have an affect have on every aspect of an immigrant Latina’s life. To avoid re-traumatizing Latina immigrants who have experienced trauma, it is essential for researchers and community advocates to be trauma-informed in their work.

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