

# Immigration: A Dynamic Process

By Olga L. Mejía, MA

The aspect most examined in the psychological literature about the immigration process is its impact on the individual. Adjusting to a new culture while maintaining the home culture to varying degrees is referred to as *acculturation*, and several models explain the transition (Berry, 1980; LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993; Padilla, 1980). However, an important aspect that is not often examined is the reaction and attitudes by the adopted country toward immigrants, and the subsequent impact on the immigrants' adjustment.

Reasons for immigrating from Latin America to the United States are varied, and may have economical, political, religious, or social origins. Furthermore, moving from one country to another entails learning a myriad of new skills, customs, and traditions. Initially the most salient changes include learning a new language, dealing with legal documentation or lack thereof; adjusting to new types of foods and ways of dressing, and finding employment (Padilla, Cervantes, Maldonado, & Garcia, 1988). Other factors that facilitate or hinder acculturation include intended length of stay, redefining religious traditions; adjusting to new ways of communicating and relating, the economic, political, religious, and social conditions prior to immigration, and the individual's psychological characteristics (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Juthani, 1992). Often times, immigrants also mourn the loss of their family members or relatives who remain in their home country.

About 51 percent of the 28.4 million immigrants living in the United States are from Latin American, which includes Mexico, Central American, the Caribbean and South America. Furthermore, Latino immigrants are more likely to live in the west (42.1 percent) or south (32.5 percent) (Lollock, 2001).

In regard to the impact of immigration on the United States, it is important to note two historical facts: (1) the United States was founded by European immigrants who took lands away from Native Americans; and (2) California, as well as Arizona, western Colorado, New Mexico, Nevada, Texas, and Utah were part of Mexico until 1848. Since then, immigration between Latin America (especially Mexico) and the United States has been characterized by an ebb and flow governed by labor demands, economic recessions, and deportations. Currently, the predominant sentiments toward immigrants are not favorable. For example, in the last few years several laws have been passed in the United States that specifically restrict the lives of immigrants, whether the law is instituted or not. These propositions (187, 209, 227) and decision (Hopwood) deny public services to undocumented immigrants, prohibit state institutions from giving any special consideration to ethnic minorities, abolish bilingual education programs in California public schools and prohibit consideration of race in admitting students to Texas state universities. Also, several prominent political figures, such as California ex-governor Pete Wilson, have strongly opposed Latino immigration to the United States.

The psychological adjustment of Latino immigrants is not only impacted by the numerous stressors involved in arriving in a new country, but also by current U.S. views toward Latino immigrants. It is essential to integrate the interactions between immigrant acculturation and U.S. views about immigrants in clinical and research practices in psychology. The following examples illustrate important underlying factors to remember when working with Latino immigrants:

- The process of learning a new culture while modifying the home culture is ongoing (Espin, 1987; Salgado de Snyder, 1987) and reactions through this transition are not necessarily pathological, but rather a normal response to a stressful situation (Comas-Diaz, 1987).
- Latino immigrants are likely to experience feelings of isolation and homesickness in mourning the loss of family members and relatives who remain in the home country (Ainslie, 1998; Arredondo-Dowd, 1981). Furthermore, isolation may be exacerbated by feeling unaccepted by the U.S. culture.

- Given that language is central in addressing psychological conflict, it is important to also address Spanish use in conducting psychotherapy or research with Latino immigrants (Comas-Diaz, 1987).
- Latino immigrants are likely to encounter discrimination in schools, employment sites, and social services agencies due to legislation being enacted.
- Finally, examining or emphasizing positive coping skills throughout the acculturative process is important. Examples of positive coping skills are building self-esteem, encouraging flexibility in communication and styles of relating to others, and building social support networks.

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