Immigration: A Story of Resilience

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According to The Department of Homeland Security, there were 6.6 million undocumented immigrants from Mexico residing in the U.S. in 2015 (Baker, 2018). Additionally, out of 12.0 million undocumented immigrants in 2015, nearly 80 percent had been in the United States for longer than ten years (Baker, 2018). Although many undocumented immigrants are a long-standing, irreplaceable part of our society's fabric, their presence and acceptance into communities and academic spaces continue to be a privilege they must fight to have. Immigrant women specifically "make the difficult decision to migrate to the United States, often leaving behind their entire families and female support structures, in hopes of securing a better future for their children" (Farfán-Santos, 2019). Their extraordinary trials and hard-fought triumphs illuminate all we stand to gain if we move beyond single-story ideologies and belief systems to delve deeper into the stories from which the immigration data emerge.

This case study aims to illustrate how one woman's journey from undocumented immigrant to naturalized citizenship and the birth story of her resilience are intricately connected. It will explore how her new legal status in the U.S. and unwavering strength both manifest from the adversities she encountered, the border she crossed, and her ability to move beyond the limitations of being undocumented in a new country. Just as resilience speaks to her ability to live within and adapt to systems of oppression, a second irrevocable truth also exists. "Undocumented mothers may be severely constrained by their undocumented status, but that does not erase their self-identification as mothers and the responsibility they feel to the care and future of their children" (Farfán-Santos, 2019). Together, these truths begin to paint a portrait of how to honor the undocumented student and family population's unique lived experiences and what advocates can do to challenge the systemic practices that perpetuate their vulnerabilities.

Holding space for undocumented parents and their families' stories may also help guide our efforts to enhance their protective factors and amplify the adolescent characteristics that drive resilience later in life.

Literature Review

Risk Factors

As Zolkoski & Bullock note in their research, clinicians need to identify and understand what environmental factors place children and developing young adults at risk of future vulnerabilities (2012). For the undocumented immigrant and immigrant-origin youth populations, specific risk factors such as prior traumatic experiences, poverty, minority status, and discrimination may all impact their chances of attaining their full potential later in life as adults (Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). Examining these risk factors offers a window of opportunity for providing evidence-based, culturally sensitive support geared towards lowering the likelihood of a negative outcome or mental illness probability.

Trauma exposure is an especially prevalent risk factor. "Traumatic experiences can occur at various stages of the immigration process, either before immigrants' migration, during their journey, or after arriving at their receiving community—and in some cases at each of these points" (Suárez-Orozco, Motti-Stefanidi, Marks, & Katsiaficas, 2018). For many individuals, traumatic experiences such as war or civil unrest may have precipitated their movement across borders. This exposure often leads to high stress, PTSD, and other related symptoms for these individuals or families, even as they adapt to their new life. It is also crucial to recognize that the impact of a single traumatic event may vary across cultures and individuals, an essential consideration in supporting this population.

Attitudes and biases towards migrants and migrant families also impact their ability to adapt positively to their receiving community. In the U.S., specifically, racism and racial discrimination against minorities continue to persist. Therefore, racially distinct immigrants are at greater risk of experiencing discrimination than are those who are *White Passing* (Suárez-Orozco, Motti-Stefanidi, Marks, & Katsiaficas, 2018). According to this same literature review by Suárez-Orozco, et al. (2018), the potency with which this discrimination is perceived by immigrant-origin youth can negatively impact their academic performance and psychological well-being. It is also essential that the frequency and experience of daily micro-aggressions for undocumented immigrants and immigrant-origin youth are not overlooked. These factors stemming from racial beliefs in the receiving community can also lead to emotional weathering.

Additionally, current research confirms that poverty and low socioeconomic status are significant risk factors for the migrant population. For example, as mentioned by Raffaelli et al. (2012), lack of financial security and food supply scarcity lead immigrant-origin children to be vulnerable to health and psychological development issues. These factors also directly affect overall household and family well-being. Given the link between childhood and adult mental health issues, understanding factors that buffer mental health risk in immigrant youth is critical for serving the U.S. immigrant community (Zetino, Galicia, & Venta, 2020).

Protective Factors

Successful adaptation among immigrant youths is a highly important issue for multiple stakeholders in many countries because of its potential long-term significance for migrants' well-being and the prosperity and social connectedness of the receiving societies (Motti-Stefanidi, 2019). Therefore, a solid understanding and examination of potentially positive forces are necessary.

In their study of resilience and protective factors as strengths, Lemus-Way & Johansson (2019) defined Protective factors as situations, contexts, or personality characteristics that decrease the likelihood of risk in the face of an adverse situation. They further explained that while the process of developing these protective factors can be distressing for most individuals, these strengths then become the tools employed when facing future adversity (Lemus-Way & Johansson, 2019). Based on this development theory, some critical recurring internal strength characteristics among the migrant population include spirituality or religion, courage, and motivation. External factors such as community or institutions, familial support, and non-familial support relationships also serve as protective factors.

Historically, prayer and religion have been consistently utilized by individuals or suggested as a coping mechanism in the face of adversity. In their discussion of spirituality, Lemus-Way & Johansson noted, "it can be seen how migrants believed that God was at their side during their journey and this presence helped them succeed in reaching the northern Mexican border" (2019). In their work, they also observed a strong sense of courage and bravery across participant testimonies. They defined this characteristic as the ability to act intentionally in the face of risks, threats, or obstacles to reach a goal (Lemus-Way & Johansson, 2019).

As previously mentioned, there are also vital external factors that have a remarkable influence on immigrants and immigrant-origin youth. In their study, Raffaelli et al. (2012) described these external factors as social capital or strong ties with friends and family as a source of strength. For immigrants specifically, possessing human capital offers "skills and knowledge that allow individuals to be productive within a particular context, which in the case of immigrants includes educational level, familiarity with the U.S. context, and English language fluency" (Raffaelli, Tran, Wiley, Galarza-Heras, & Lazarevic, 2012).

Additional research also found that supportive relationships with peers and teachers can promote safe climates for all students, promote academic motivation, and school connectedness (Suárez-Orozco, Motti-Stefanidi, Marks, & Katsiaficas, 2018).

"Resilience has been defined as a human capacity to withstand and overcome obstacles despite setbacks" (Borjian, 2018). However, it is critical to distinguish that although researchers continuously define resilience, the previously mentioned risk and protective factors ultimately combine to become their overall resiliency. The combined effect of these traits and assets are subsequently directly related to one's ability to adapt and overcome adverse events. Moreover, "rather than being an inborn trait, recent studies on resilience show that it is an interactive and contextual process, with individual characteristics such as self-efficacy being interrelated with influences of one's surrounding environment" (Panisch et al., 2020).

Methodology

Procedure

For this case study, a semi-structured interview was conducted using the Zoom platform. Specific participant criteria included: must be an adult, must have enough distance from the event or adversity to discuss recovery or resilience, and must not be a friend or family member. Based on these criteria, a single 54-year-old adult female was selected. The participant provided verbal and written consent before the interview, and participation in this case study was voluntary.

A single 90-minute interview was held with the participant, and a questionnaire of approximately 35 questions was used. Before starting the interview, the participant was encouraged to share relevant memories, stories, or emotions they encountered as they felt called.

The participant was also given space to deviate from answering specific questions due to this interview's nature.

The participant, referred to as Sol, was asked a series of questions about the events that precipitated leaving her country of origin, undocumented legal status, single parenthood, socio-economic barriers related to immigration, adaptation in the receiving community, and questions relating to coping through adversity. To protect the participant's privacy, all names and identifying information contained in this study were modified.

All articles used in this case study were located by searching the Chapman University library and its various literature databases. Specific keywords used to identify relevant journal articles through library search included: immigration, women, migrant, undocumented, resilience, immigrant-origin, youth, adversity, and coping.

Participant

Sol

Sol is a 54-year-old female who was born in Mexico. Though her unauthorized entry into the U.S. largely influenced her life trajectory, Sol's experience with adversity began at a mere six days old when her mother died due to childbirth complications. Her maternal grandmother and extended family did their best to raise and support her, but it was apparent in our conversation that Sol felt this early loss deeply. Sol explained that the expectation to assist with the caretaking of younger family members was present from a young age, and at an early age, she found herself providing the primary care for other infants in the family.

Sol emphasized that it was abnormal for school or educational instruction to be a priority. Growing up in Mexico, Sol had to travel by foot to school and had very little encouragement from family, so she had little motivation to complete her education. Within the multigenerational

home where she grew up, she detailed how only one "Tia" encouraged her to complete school and become a seamstress. After a long pause, she regretfully disclosed, " I wish I could get a high school diploma" (S.O., personal communication, October 11, 2020). Sol stressed that she wished someone would have been present to share the importance of education and give her better guidance. She shared that she now stresses education's importance with her children and others because of this experience. She draws a substantial amount of pride from the fact that her children have surpassed her academically.

As we neared the point in our interview where we discussed her border crossing, Sol's demeanor noticeably shifted, and it was observably tricky for her to find the words in English that conveyed how she was feeling. She shared that she was 22 years old with three small children when she realized leaving Mexico was their best option. Though she tried to hold them back at first, several tears escaped. After a moment of silence, she explained how she used the help of a coyote and eventually ran across the border before hiding in a public restroom from ICE officers. A female member helped bring her children across the border after she arrived. As she struggled to contain her tears, she said softly, "nobody ever ask me. It feels good to share my struggles" (S.O., personal communication, October 11, 2020).

Upon settling into their new normal, she explained that an Aunt helped connect her with a family who would come to play a pivotal role in life. Always the caretaker, Sol stepped into the role of the nanny with an established local family seamlessly. She detailed how not long after finding this job, she secured a place for herself and the children. "We all lived in one room with a bunk bed and with a desk" (S.O., personal communication, October 11, 2020). She shared that she will always remember when her employer, Margaret, asked to see her apartment. Sol was proud and explained that she saw no reason to hide what she had worked hard to build and

maintain. Upon seeing the single-room living situation, Margaret insisted that Sol accept their family's financial support in transitioning to a living space more suitable for a family of four. Not long after, Sol shared that Margaret and her family purchased a mobile home for her. It was a gift that moved her beyond words, even to this day. Sol said, full of emotion, "I found angels in my life" (S.O., personal communication, October 11, 2020).

Time and time again, Margaret proved to be Sol's biggest ally and strongest advocate. Eventually, even assisting her with navigating an intimidating immigration system to change her legal status. Several years ago, with her children at her side, Sol finally became a citizen. With a smile, she said, "I'm feeling really powerful when I got papers… talking about it, I see… I'm proud of what I overcome" (S.O., personal communication, October 11, 2020).

Discussion

Themes

At the time of this interview, decades had passed since Sol ran from her birth country with a *coyote*. Referring to the journey across the Southern border into the US, Sol recalled, "We try only one time. I hid in a bathroom from Immigration. A cousin brought my daughters across later" (S.O., personal communication, October 11, 2020). As she sat reflecting in her daughter's kitchen with tear-stained cheeks, the heaviness of these words was palpable. The sounds of her grandchildren as they ran through the home her daughter owned lingered in the background. A single question now filled the silence between us. How had she done it?

A Greater Power

As we see in current literature trends, Sol credits much of her ability to cope with the adversity in her life to a belief in a greater power and her children's presence. For Sol, she found a renewed sense of purpose after having children. During our interview, it was unmistakable that

Sol's children and "mis Nietos," as she affectionately called them, were an abundant source of courage and strength. Sol stressed that having children was a critical turning point and the driving force behind her desire for opportunities beyond what she envisioned in Mexico. Like is often documented in the literature, she shared that over the years, she has tirelessly "worked to reassure, provide a sense of safety, educate their children about their rights and privileges, and encourage them to "avoid bad paths" (Arce, Kumar, Kuperminc, & Roche, 2020, p. 109).

Throughout her journey, religion has also been a deep well of strength she often pulls from when facing challenges. Hesitating only to find the right words in English, she said, "I remember others have it worse and how lucky I am. I feeling this is my rock...God" (S.O., personal communication, October 11, 2020). Sol attributes many of the victories she has experienced, such as making it into the U.S., becoming a Citizen, and raising her children to God. As Lemus-Way & Johansson et al. noted in their findings, many migrant believers feel that they succeed in their journey across the Mexican border due to having the Spirit of God by their side (2019). Additionally, Pastors within religious organizations often serve as pillars of reassurance who offer practical advice and instrumental mental health support for immigration-related concerns (Arce, Kumar, Kuperminc, & Roche, 2020, p. 107). Sol's perseverance and that of other migrant families demonstrate "the influence of the belief in God in the willingness of migrants to continue with the journey despite the difficulties of it" (Lemus-Way & Johansson, 2019). Through each season of Sol's life, religion has continued to be a leading light and the tool she utilizes most to cope with new challenges and life stressors. As she explained, "with God, everything is possible" (S.O., personal communication, October 11, 2020).

Social Capital

Throughout Sol's story and across the literature, non-familial support persons play a life-sustaining role in successfully adapting migrant individuals and families. Specifically, these community stakeholders and peer supports often act as a human bridge. They link treacherous roads to pathways with better access to psychosocial support, financial resources, and a solid chance to adapt in the receiving community.

Shortly after arriving, Sol was fortunate to connect with a woman named Margaret, and in her, she found both a lifeline and a cherished, life-long friendship that exists to this day. The evidence put forth by Ann Masten supports the idea that Sol's relationship with Margaret, her children, and those in her community all contribute to the emergence of her resilience. In her work, Masten specifically posits that resilience "does not come from rare and special qualities, but from the everyday magic of ordinary, normative human resources in the minds, brains, and bodies of children, in their families and relationships, and their communities" (Masten, 2001).

During our interview, it was clear that Margaret represents what we have come to know as human capital in our expanding body of research. With Margaret's aid, Sol found employment, transportation, and housing despite facing a significant language barrier and limited financial resources. Sol also saw her motivation and endurance ignited, a phenomenon that is often mentioned in the research. As Borjian described it, " on multiple occasions, every respondent expressed the significance of others in supporting their goals, and several noted their eagerness to succeed was a form of returning the favor to those who gave so much to them" (2018, p. 28). With this in mind, the depth of gratitude Sol has for Margaret is not surprising and should encourage our collective effort to connect children facing adversity during their formative

years with human capital. As Sol so perfectly framed it, “I found angels in my life. I’m feeling really lucky” (S.O., personal communication, October 11, 2020).

Racism, Politics, and Social Climate

Beginning in 2017, “many executive orders were signed that directly affected immigrant communities and some of them have criminalized immigrants and increased the “enforcement capacity” of Immigration Customs Enforcement” (Arce, Kumar, Kuperminc, & Roche, 2020, p. 107). For immigrant parents and immigrant-origin youth, the daily threat of deportation, family separation, and social climate has the potential to be crushing. In their study, Arce et al. emphasized, “although research on the impact of restrictive federal laws on immigrant well-being is still in its infancy, considerable research has documented negative associations between restrictive state and local policies and physical and psychosocial outcomes among Latina/o immigrant families” (2020, p. 107).

Persevering through this lived experience has manifested a strong desire for community service and local political activism for Sol. Since becoming a citizen, she makes a concerted effort to exercise her newfound privilege. During the last election season, she devoted time to a grassroots campaign for a local city council position. Proudly, Sol mentioned that she brings this revolutionary approach to mothering as well. Her civic engagement motivation has led to a “voting party” with her adult children, where they discussed propositions, attendance at public demonstrations, and presidential candidate rallies. Based on existing evidence, the desire for civic engagement is not uncommon among this population. As Suárez-Orozco, Hernández, & Casanova explained, immigrants and immigrant-origin youth may feel a strong sense of social responsibility or duty to contribute to the greater good (2015). This feeling of social

responsibility can lead them to civic engagement that is broadly focused on contributing to society and helping individuals in their community (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015).

Sol's relationship with Margaret and the rising temperature of dialogue surrounding immigration also emphasizes the vast spectrum of attitudes towards migrant families in the US on both the micro and macro-level. While anti-immigrant sentiments appear to have been emboldened in recent years, Margaret's existence and fixture within Sol's story is evidence that there are powerful immigrant *allies* among us. As Sol said so perfectly during our interview, "believe in good people… There is more good people" (S.O., personal communication, October 11, 2020).

Conclusion

Implications for Counseling Practice

Thus far, through the growing body of literature and this individual case study, it is clear that a culturally sensitive framework is crucial to supporting this population in our schools. Each time a counselor holds space for the stories that belong to their immigrant students and families, they help shift the power differential ever so slightly. We unveil moments to lessen the weight of this unique life circumstance on our students, and we find an invaluable opportunity to shift the focus of their personal and family narrative from deficits to strengths.

As Tello and Lonn discuss in their research, counselors often lack understanding of the intersectionality of identities experienced by the first generation or immigrant-origin youth population (2017). Therefore, growing in our understanding of their values and culture lends itself to more culturally competent policies, programs, and interventions. Tello and Lonn offer high school counselors as an example, further explaining, "it is important for high school and college counselors to understand that placing family responsibilities above school does not mean

education is not valued by Latinx students and their families. Counselors must tailor their approaches to take into account the client's cultural expectations for assisting the family in times of need" (2017, p.351).

Research has also revealed the resiliency of our immigrant-origin youth and families. A finding which supports "taking a strengths-based approach in evaluating the experiences of first-generation students also aligns with the tenets of the counseling profession" (Tello and Lonn, 2017, p. 353). Additionally, Tello and Lonn highlight a dominant characteristic of this student population, stating "because their parents did not attend post-secondary education, this group of college students has not inherited the social or cultural capital common to many traditional college freshmen. Both high school and college counselors are in positions to support the psychosocial and emotional needs of Latinx FGCS, which may increase successful college completion rates" (2017, p. 349). Armed with this knowledge, counselors can leverage critical supports such as adult mentorship, nurturing coping skills, and accessibility to community allies to ensure equitability for our minoritized students.

As societal conversations continue to hinge upon creating diversity in our schools and post-secondary academic settings, counselors and educators must evaluate the tools and paths we take to achieve this goal. It is not sufficient to simply bring *diversity and inclusion* to our programs and campuses if this means we are bringing immigrant and immigrant-origin youth into unsafe spaces. When counselors look to the stories behind the data to choose their curricula and student supports, we create safer spaces equipped to meet these students where they are.

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Postscript: reflective essay

During the process of writing this paper, I thought of this quote by Resmaa Menakem often:

Trauma decontextualized in a person looks like personality.

Trauma decontextualized in a family looks like family traits.

Trauma in a people looks like culture.

I found myself almost in tears listening to this particular story. What stayed with me most throughout this process was her admission that no one had ever asked how she felt crossing the border alone or while adapting to life in a foreign country. She seemed visibly relieved to share these experiences aloud with me. I was shocked to learn that while decades had passed, she had never shared her story in this way. It was interesting that her confession mirrored what I have frequently experienced while working with birthing families. The majority of new parents are never asked to share how they feel about their birth or the new normal. I was reminded yet again of how impactful it can be just to sit with someone. There is so much to be learned from storytelling. Throughout this project, I was also reminded that sometimes when we say we are *holding space* for someone, we are actually holding their trauma. This is both an incredible privilege and a burden, and I know for myself will require healthy boundary setting and self-care.

In listening to this story, I was inspired by this woman's ability to see the good things in her life and those around her. She faced such incredible challenges and many times struggled to make ends meet. I do not think anyone would fault her if she had more of a scarcity mindset, yet she continues to live and give to others in her community in abundance. I was also profoundly moved by her revolutionary mothering, where she encouraged her children to achieve more

academically, contribute to the greater good, and break the cycles that existed in previous generations in their family. This is something I aspire to with my children.

Admittedly, stories like hers are near and dear to me. My own family is mixed status, and my husband is a former DACA recipient. I have a tremendous amount of empathy for undocumented immigrants and those attempting to maneuver our immigration system. The process is stressful, financially burdensome, and tedious. In recent years, as the discussion surrounding what it means to be privileged has grown, I think many of us still overlook birth privilege. When it comes down to it, so many of us are just lucky to have been born on one side of a border. I am also incredibly grateful to have crossed paths with a fantastic school counselor at the community college level. As a first-generation college student who had virtually no family support at the end of high school, she was my human capital. I am fortunate to be here finally, and I know it is in part because of her.