The Intersection Between Immigration and Trauma: Considering Culture in Behavioral Health Interventions

National Hispanic and Latino ATTC Presentation
May 23, 2017
University of Houston, Houston, TX

Miguel E. Gallardo, Psy.D.
Professor of Psychology
Director, Aliento, The Center for Latina/o Communities
Pepperdine University
Remembering Who We Are and Building Relationships

“The fight is never about grapes or lettuce. It is always about people.”

- Cesar Chavez
Family Pictures
Latina/o Immigrants

• Latina/o immigrants are incredibly diverse (Alegria et al., 2007) and we cannot assume all experiences are the same.

• Recent research found the most common reasons were a desire for better civil and legal rights, better benefits or opportunities, family-related reasons, having a home in the U.S., and desiring an American identity (Gonzalez-Barrera, Lopez, Passel, & Taylor, 2012).

• Reasons often vary by Latina/o background, age, gender, and education. Example: Immigrants from Cuba may be motivated to escape political repression whereas Mexican immigrants may cite jobs or family as their primary motivations.

• Xenophobia affects both immigrants and U.S.-born minority populations and is an increasing problem for Latinas/os in the United States (Lopez, Morin, & Taylor, 2010; Lopez & Taylor, 2010).
The New York Times (2013) reported that there is a growing body of mortality research on immigrants that demonstrates that the longer we live in this country, the worse their rates of heart disease, high blood pressure and diabetes.

The report goes on to state that while American-born children of immigrants may have more money, they tend to live shorter lives than their parents.

Deaux (2006), one notable difference between the United States and Canada is the adoption of the “mosaic” metaphor by Canadians to describe immigration, as opposed to the “melting pot” metaphor widely adopted in the United States.
Acculturation and Acculturative Stress
Acculturative Stress

• Acculturation refers to the process of a cultural group attempting to exist within the larger, host cultural group; “culture learning and behavioral adaptation that takes place as exposure to a nonnative culture” (Miranda et al., 2006, p. 269).

• The pressure to adapt to a new culture can act as a heavy burden and often produce significant stress. The selective abandonment of certain cultural values can oftentimes feel like a loss of identity.

• Acculturative stress represents negative “side effects” of acculturation such as trauma, anxiety, and disorientation (Finch et al. 2001), it is possible that acculturative stress may link acculturation dynamics to substance use.

• Acculturative stress consists of psychological or social stressors experienced by individuals due to an incongruence of beliefs, values, and other cultural norms between their country of origin and country of reception (Cabassa, 2003).
Acculturative Stress cont’

• Literature has suggested that acculturative stress can be associated with both Latina/o and U.S. cultural orientations. In a community largely geared toward U.S. culture, high levels of Latina/o-culture orientation might be most strongly associated with acculturative stress.

• Recent immigrants to the United States may experience difficulties related to language barriers, documentation challenges, access to resources, financial resources, and an overwhelming sense discrimination due to our current political climate, including racial profiling and immigration raids.

• Many Latinas/os residing within the United States for longer periods of time may be likely to experience greater levels of racial and ethnic discrimination and may occupy low social status within the host culture (Gallardo, 2012; LaFramboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993).
Acculturative Stress cont’

• The cumulative effects of these stress-inducing factors are thought to lead to the development of problem behaviors. This is particularly true when the stress associated with the acculturative process is not buffered by personal resources (Gil et al., 2000).

• Undocumented immigration status and socioeconomic issues have been cited to be the main sources of acculturative stress among Latino immigrants (Finch and Vega, 2003).
Concern

- U.S. context has been shown to have the strongest influence on acculturative stress, particularly the perceived racial discrimination and difficulty visiting family abroad, followed by development context (English skills) and economic context (financial constraints) (Bekteshi & van Hook, 2015).

- Racism, discrimination, unfair treatment and negative external judgments about one’s worth have deleterious effects on both physical and psychological health (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999).

- Stress-based theories of health have argued that devalued race or ethnicity may confer population level risk for poor health and mental health outcomes as a result of racism and discrimination, lack of access to economic and social resources, and other sources of stress exposure due to social disadvantage. (Mendelson, et al, 2008).

- The relationship between substance abuse and trauma is complex. Substances might be used to cope with past experiences of trauma. Such use might then contribute to additional traumas given the contexts and settings in which substances are used (Asberg & Renk, 2012; Stevens et al.,2009; Zinzow et al., 2010).
Concern

• Yellow Horse Brave Heart, Duran, and Duran (2012) defined historical trauma as the cumulative psychological wounding over the life span and across generations, emanating from massively experienced group trauma.

• Historical trauma that emanates from group or community trauma can be transmitted to future generations as can trauma experienced at the individual level. Intergenerational trauma experienced by the individual impacts the offspring of that person (Stevens, Andrade, Korchmaros, & Sharron, 2014).

• Intergenerational trauma refers to trauma that is manifested in psychological symptoms and is transferred to future generations (Yehuda, Halligan, & Bierer, 2001).

• Intergenerational family loss trauma has been shown to be associated with substance use problems (Kaplow, Saunders, Angold, & Costello, 2010).
Latina/o Cultural Values and Strengths
Strengths and Resilience

- A variety of cultural factors may provide powerful sources of emotional resilience.

- The Hispanic/Latina/o/Immigrant Paradox (Palloni & Morenoff, 2001) is a phenomenon used to describe the communities’ unique resilience to the usual negative health outcomes of poverty and other psychosocial challenges, such as infant mortality and low birth weight, in contrast with non-Latino Whites and other groups.

- The “Barrio Advantage” - proposes that living in the same neighborhood as people with similar ethnic backgrounds confers significant advantages to one’s health (Aranda et. al., 2011)
Cultural Connections and Identity

• Studies with immigrant Latinos/as suggest that more involvement with their ethnic culture is related to less depression (Rivera, 2007; Torres, 2010) and assimilation to more depression (Torres, 2010).

• A study of Dominican immigrant women in New York City found that while they experienced high levels of discrimination and acculturative stress, high acculturation to the Latina/o culture buffered this effect (Araújo Dawson, 2009).

• Parra-Cardona, Bulock, Imig, Villarruel, and Gold (2006) : study with migrant farm workers of Mexican Origin found that despite inconsistent living arrangements and financial instability, these individuals found comfort in Estando Todos Juntos (being all together) and working to provide for their families.

• Threats to negative self-concept are buffered through the individual increasing their connectedness to ethnic group membership, thereby increasing personal worth for the individual. “Rootstraps,” not Bootstraps (National Latino Fatherhood and Family Institute, 2012)
Cultural Connections and Identity

- Ethnic identity may be particularly beneficial to immigrant individuals because of discriminatory experiences encountered in the host society (Deaux, 2006; Kasinitz et al., 2008; Suárez-Orozco, 2000).

- A strong ethnic/racial identity can protect minority youth from the harm caused by racism and discrimination (Hughes, et al., 2006; Phinney, 1996; Verkuyten & Brug, 2001).

- Ethnic Identity also been linked to self-esteem for Latino/a (Cavazos-Rehg & DeLucia-Waack, 2009) as well as positive academic outcomes (Fuligni, Witkow & García-Coll, 2005; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995; Waters, 1999).
Social Justice: (Re)visiting our Practice Framework
Wellness

• Comas-Diaz (2006), *Latino ethnic psychology* to designate the application of cultural traditions and practices into healing and liberation...and attempts to restore connectedness, foster liberation, and facilitate ethnic identity reformulation.” (p. 440).

• Three primary sets of needs: personal, relational, and collective (Prilleltensky, Nelson, & Pierson, 2001)

• **Personal**: hope, optimism, control, physical health, mental well-being, meaning, and spirituality

• **Relational**: affection, caring, compassion, support, and meaningful participation in family

• **Collective**: Safety, adequate health care, crime-free environments, and just distribution of resources

• Each supports one another and relies on the other for fulfillment and they do not compensate for one another (ex: personal growth cannot outweigh societal factors affecting health)
Psychology of Liberation

- Social Justice practitioners accompany Latinas/os by working with them to develop collaborative relationships that address societal trauma, power inequalities within their relationships and within the larger society.

- Many Latina/o families have multiproblems (ex., medical, mental health, combined with employment challenges, poverty, immigration status, etc.)

- While all of these areas need attention, many traditional forms of mental health care focus almost exclusively on the medical and mental health issues.

- Our focus centers on the individual, while the systemic interactions become background, contextual matters, and overlooked.

- Ultimately, the very social issues that are relevant to the health and well-being are background noise and tend to be excluded as legitimate forms of professional intervention. – “second class interventions” (Pakman, 2007).
Psychology of Liberation

• When we continue to reinforce that wellness only occurs within the individual, we are simultaneously supporting the reinforcement of maintaining society’s health status quo.

• Postcolonial analysis – “The simultaneous accounting for current and historical repercussions of oppressive forces, including sexism, racism, homophobia, and classism” (Almeida, Dolan-Del Vecchio, & Parker, 176, 2007).

• Contextualizing an individual or family’s current challenges within a larger current and historical context brings integrity to the healing process.

• Seeing the connection between individual/family problems and the larger sociocultural context helps client recognize that they are part of a larger network of oppression, which allows them to feel less burdened of individual pathology.

• Literature consistently addresses the need to connect individual and families to larger social networks, supports, etc.
Latina/o Therapy and Ethical Practice

- Manoleas, Organista, Negron-Velasquez, & McCormick (2000) reported that one of the primary characteristics of Latina/o clinicians working with Latino clients was implementing “a flexible ‘sense of boundaries’ and to view clients and their families holistically” (p. 388).

- In addition, they also found that Latina/o clinicians were more likely to self-disclose to their Latino clients versus with non-Latina/o clients and to follow-up after a missed appointment.

- Schank (2014) states, “Clients may seek them out precisely because they are a part of the community and seen as someone who would understand clients’ needs.

- Aldarondo (2007) encourages human service providers to consider the expansion of one’s role to be more in sync with the lived experiences of the communities we serve.

- He also states, “our goodwill and individual-oriented clinical skills are a poor match for the persistent effects of harsh social realities in the lives of those seeking our assistance (p. xix).
What does this mean for me/us?
Immigration in my life?

...how much is my life impacted by immigration/immigrants? (0 – 100%)
Immigration Consciousness

To what degree am I conscious of Immigration/Immigrants In My Life...

Earliest Memory

Most Recent Memory
Questions for Consideration

• How can we make healing and mental health services for Latina/o immigrants a process of liberation over a process of compliance to society’s everyday oppressive expectations?

• What would a psychology that is relevant to those who are socially and politically stratified look like?

• What would it look like to approach our work with the oppressed and those with the least amount of power from strength-based perspectives?

• What would my work look like if I were more creative and less restricted?

• The therapy/counseling process through a liberatory lens shifts our roles from “expert” to the role of process expert. What would this look like for me in my own work with clients and in the community?
Revisiting Perspectives about “Social Issues.”

• When mental health providers tell me that our involvement in “social issues” is not our place, I worry.

• Carlson (2013) states, our new charge must be to “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable” (p. 284).

• Doherty (2013) states that the task of mental health providers is to be citizen-therapists.

The Personal Is Political

• Mental Health and Service Delivery are value-laden

• Important to combine our commitments and obligations as professionals with our commitments and obligations as citizens

• We have become accustomed to keeping our social commitments optional and our clinical work “safely neutral”

• We assume that what is good for our profession is also good for society, leaving out legitimate solutions for people’s distress
Critical Consciousness

• Developing critical consciousness is foundational for mental health providers if he/she wants to resist replicating oppressive practices within interventions.

• Prilleltensky, Dokecki, Frieden, & Wang (2007) would argue that “wellness cannot flourish in the absence of justice, and justice is devoid of meaning in the absence of wellness” (p.19).

• Critical Consciousness is the awareness of the sociopolitical context of daily life. It means understanding the everyday realities that we take for granted and how the world operates – Ex., mental health service delivery systems is deeply still grounded in individualism and at times, oppressive practices to devalued communities.

• Research has consistently demonstrated that Latina/o families heal in connection and become more symptomatic in isolation.
Critical Consciousness

• Martin-Baro (1994) states that psychological theories based on positivist perspectives, focusing only on what can be seen and measured, leave out the possibilities contained in the person-situation dynamic.

• Example: Latino substance abuser, from a positivist perspective, is simply manifesting hypermasculine behaviors, or simply manifesting what many would erroneously deem to be “cultural practices.” Leaves out the complexity of their essence/being and how their historical, social, and economic factors affect his role as a someone who uses substances.

• A contextual and dialectical approach to understanding the intersection of Latinas/os and substance abuse explores how these factors maintain and support problematic behaviors and attitudes, while also exploring all the possibilities for change.

• For many Latina/o immigrants it is essential to take into consideration the status in which society has placed us in addition to the culture of coping and oppression in our native cultures and the one which we have arrived.

• If therapists or delivery systems are reluctant to include a collective healing process in our process of service delivery, clients will be also.
Reconceptualizing Resistance

- **Reconceptualize Resistance**: opposition to threatening and oppressive conditions; Our resistance: refusing to accept certain attitudes and behaviors, anger, dissatisfaction, demanding change, self-care, and creating alternatives to the status quo.

- Resistance ensures survival, affirmation of ethnic identity – needs to be seen as a strength-based and non-pathologizing.

- Why Resist?: Political repression and social-economic marginalization (extreme poverty, inequality, racialized devalued status, lack of civil rights, lack of legal protection) Marginalization (poverty, targeted by police, structural discrimination in schools, de-skilling in job market, etc.)

- Important to join with others to analyze power relationships; assess options for successful resistance to oppression and marginalization based on personal and collective experience; engage in everyday practices that affirm integrity in the face of discrimination.

- We need to look beyond just “symptoms” and see our communities challenges within a network of relationships.
A Final Comment

In Lak’ech Ala K’in (I Am You and You Are Me)

Tú eres mi otro yo.
You are my other me.
Si te hago daño a ti,
If I do harm to you,
Me hago daño a mí mismo.
I do harm to myself.
Si te amo y respeto,
If I love and respect you,
Me amo y respeto yo.
I love and respect myself.

Luis Valdez (1973)
Miguel E. Gallardo, Psy.D.

Professor of Psychology
Director, Aliento, The Center for Latina/o Communities
Pepperdine University, Graduate School of Education and Psychology
18111 Von Karman Avenue, Suite 209
Irvine, CA 92612

Miguel.Gallardo@pepperdine.edu