

NEWCOMER MEXICAN IMMIGRANTS' SENSE OF
BELONGING AND COMMUNITY

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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

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DEDICATION

I want to dedicate this work to my wife, Kym, for all the unconditional support to complete this thesis and for the amazing time that I have experienced since I have met her. I also want to dedicate this work to my little children, who are truly the motivation in my life, Mia, Max, Zoey, and Jeremiah, for giving me the laughs and hugs that I needed to complete this thesis. I would also like to dedicate this thesis to my mother, Florentina and my sisters, especially to Obdulia, for knowing that I could even when I didn't.

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ABSTRACT

There is limited information on how new Mexican immigrants living in small communities experience their new cultural contexts and the sense of belonging within their new communities. The purpose of this exploratory qualitative study was to examine how first comer Mexican immigrants experience and connect to the community in which they live. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine Mexican immigrant adults who have lived in the United States for less than one year. The findings showed that the participants experience feelings of isolation, which then creates barriers connecting to their communities. The participants identified religion and religious practices as an important ethnic activity that helps them overcome cultural displacement. Participants also expressed the desire for social workers to understand their unique situations and to become their voices and bridges to the communities. The findings in this study suggest that more connection is needed to and within the population of Mexican immigrants. Social workers can assist in the facilitation of community organizing driven by the immigrant community members themselves with the aim of increasing awareness about the immigrant community and helping them build a community that they envision and that would give them the sense of belonging and connection that they crave. A recommendation for future research is to use participatory action research as a more anti-oppressive and transformative way of examining issues impacting minority and oppressed populations.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

The economic growth and the free labor market in agriculture, services, and manufacturing in the United States, have motivated the constant arrival of new generations of undocumented Mexican immigrants (Raffaelli et al., 2012). These immigrants now comprise the largest ethnic group living in the United States. New arrival immigrants are most often young, speak little English, and have little formal education (Hancock, 2005). They are very poor with highly vulnerable life conditions from their communities of origin. They have left their families and their native communities to seek progress and upward mobility in the American labor market with the inspiration and support of their families in their native rural communities (Organista et al., 2013) and the intent to return as soon as familial financial hardships are stabilized (Partida, 1996). It is well recognized that the process of immigration and assimilation experiences produce disruptive effects among the children and the families of first-comer immigrants as they encounter different cultural contexts and life experiences (Partida, 1996; Hancock, 2005).

For first generations of immigrants, the process of acculturation is determined by the individual's ability to resolve what is essential to maintain one's own identity from the culture of origin and what valuable relations are thought to be important to pursue or avoid within the host culture group (Khisty, 2001). Because there is no

substantial evidence of their existence on American soil, undocumented Mexican immigrants experience high levels of discrimination and social displacement. In the process of the social psychopolitical acculturation, immigrants do not have the citizen level of permanency (social status) and the sense of belonging (place/identity) of long-time U.S. immigrant families. They are at a stage of fear, shame and hopelessness from their own life circumstances and self-construction and assimilation processes (Garcia-Ramirez et al. 2011).

Undocumented immigrants are socially excluded from participating as active public members, and instead hide in the shadows of blame as “illegal aliens,” thereby, living a life of alienation. This acquired social alienation also excludes undocumented Mexican immigrants from the political and civil engagement of belonging within the arrived community (Reed-Danahay & Brettell, 2008). Under the federal law, undocumented immigrants are categorized as criminals, which make them ineligible to assume identities as indispensable workers and active agents in the organization of the American society (Guzman, 2013). In addition, immigrants automatically lose their social rights when they immigrate to the United States. For instance, undocumented adult immigrants have no voice or vote in the political arena and consequently lose in regard to active community participation. Chacon (2011) states that Latinos and Caribbean immigrant communities want their voices taken into account and hope to go beyond their traditional roles as isolated illegal immigrant workers, and because of their residential or social stratification status, immigrants are “easy targets of political attacks as well as convenient scapegoats to blame for the

United States social and economic ills...” (p. 469). Tucker and Santiago (2013) found that Latin immigrants who do engage in civil community activities are those few who share the same socioeconomic characteristics and perceive themselves as equals in the dominant culture.

The meaning of belonging to place, identity, and placemaking for immigrants “is often displaced by the sense of isolation and alienation in the new location” (Feldman et al., 2003, p. 9). Additionally, the exposure of two divergent structural cultural forces creates barriers for immigrants to establish a sense of identity and belongingness (Organista et al., 2013).

Besides being discriminated against in terms of social participation, undocumented adult immigrants face social disconnection and cultural shock, which only further inhibits them from connecting with local communities. Immigrants are more likely to experience depression, loss of control, and anxiety as a result of the migratory stress event and the ongoing pressures and personal conflicts related to adaptation (Hancock, 2005). These psychosocial stresses have been also associated with the hardships of being poor and having weakened social supports (O’Connor et al., 2013).

Similar to undocumented males, first generation immigrant females experience discrimination (racial profiling), uncertainty, and a lack of jobs. These are reported as the top three challenges that first generation females experience living in communities where anti-immigrant policies are reinforced daily (Ayon & Becerra, 2013). These challenges have been associated with more risk taking behaviors, both

among male and female immigrants. It has been found that male undocumented workers are more likely to be vulnerable to develop mental health and substance abuse problems because of poor working conditions and sociopolitical vulnerability that do not allow them to seek public health prevention services (Negi, 2011).

The “sociohistorical features of the origin culture appears to protect many families from these pressures” (Hancock, 2005, p. 693). Cardoso and Thompson (2010) found that Latino immigrant families deal better with stress, hardship, and trauma (which are all noted risk factors) associated with migration and adaptation by fostering the ethnic identity, family and cultural traditions (protective factors) of the Mexican immigrants. Negi (2011) found that young adult undocumented immigrants were able to bolster well-being and deal with the impact of sadness, suffering, and anxiety in their lives related to the immigration and acculturation experience through protective factors such as being able to support their families and being connected with religion and friends.

The decontextualization of the undocumented immigrant by the American society has only increased the lack of interest to serve the needs of the minority groups (Viruell-Fuentes, 2007). Engstrom and Okamura (2007) believe that most social welfare institutions serve immigrants and refugees under the influence of established models that make generalized assumptions, which create cultural barriers to social assistance. Institutions assume that newcomers “must accommodate the institution’s norms, rather than vice versa” (p. 105). Therefore, undocumented immigrants want to stay away from social services because they struggle to fit in the

social services system, as traditionally there is no place for them in the systems themselves. Nam (2011) argues that welfare and policy reform have permeated public assistance by imposing restrictive eligibility rules that make immigrants more vulnerable to illness and poverty, fear deportation, and anticipate future negative effects for receiving assistance and denial of possible residential status. Sometimes community agencies cannot support the interests of the communities because they depend on specific mandates or program objectives that are not intended to build community capacity other than deliver agencies' promised deliverables. Gibbon et al. (2002) recognize that "the capacity of a group depends on the resources opportunities or constrains (ecological, political, and environmental), and the conditions in which people and groups live" (p. 485).

Acculturation models assume that the assimilation process for immigrants only depends on the immigrants' desire to belong and ignore that immigrants have many structural constraints; it is easy then to victimize and blame the immigrants for their culture dysfunctionality (Viruell-Fuentes, 2007). As a result, undocumented immigrants begin not trusting the established social structures that are supposed to support people's needs. The psychological stress that carries the feeling of being discriminated makes immigrants purposely isolate from the contextual sociopolitical experience (Negi, 2011). Rowel et al. (2012) argue that a grassroots community approach that is "bottom-up" can motivate citizens and communities to participate in community planning processes (p. 126).

Restructuring in a multicultural community requires seeing people not just for their residential status, as broader opportunities exist when all people who are part of a residential area are included (Hepburn, 2011). Cultural integration allows self-construction, “creates meaning and sense, and to act with intentionality,” group and social capacity “thinking of oneself and society as a whole...” (Garcia-Ramirez et al. 2011, p. 89); meanwhile, social integration shapes the territory, promotes unity, and designs ways for collective actions and mutual identity (Theodori, 2005). The experience of cultural displacement disappears over time, when “the transcultural family transforms its way of being in relation to both its culture of origin and its adoptive culture’s values and orientations” (Khisty, 2001, p. 24). The cultural context of wellbeing starts in the ecological aspects and opportunities available in the community. Garcia-Ramirez et al. (2011) believe that cultural integration “is a complex process of transformation of the self and the capacity to transform oppressive settings into empowering contexts” (p.87).

The new vision to strengthen multicultural communities and its individuals is through enhancing community capacity via the process of community-building activities (Holley, 2003). Murray and Dunn (1995) define community capacity “as increasing the ability of people and institutions to do what is required for them” (p. 91). Community capacity building focuses on promoting social change and economic development, delivering services, and addressing the needs of people living in the community where, “resident participation is meaningful in the change process and the importance of developing their human and social capital as a condition for sustainable

community change” (Chaskin, 2001, p. 292). Building community capacity includes calls for members of the community, agencies and practitioners working together for the same means or end of increasing community capacity (Gibbon et al., 2002, p. 486). From the view of each individual member as part of a living community, the adult immigrants need to bring their own cultural context and interpretation of their living experiences. No matter what ethnicity, race, social status, “human beings question and seek meaning for their lives” (Imre, 1984, p. 42).

Statement of Purpose

Undocumented Mexican immigrants now comprise the largest ethnic group in the United States. However, with no legal voice or claim to rights within the United States, these immigrants remain a silent majority within the U.S. border. The purpose of this study was to examine how first generation Mexican immigrants living in Stanislaus County have experienced the dynamic environment of small communities and the process of adaptation/acclulturation. This study explored what types of ethnic activities they have practiced to overcome cultural displacement and how they have built their own sense of belonging and community. The goal was to identify what contextual elements of a community strengthen or weaken social integration, which have directly impacted the emotional and social wellbeing of the first comer immigrant. The research questions that guided this study are:

Q1. How do first comer Mexican immigrants perceive community?

Q2. What types of ethnic activities do first comer Mexican immigrants practice to overcome cultural displacement and how do they build their own sense of belonging and identity?

Q3. How do first comer immigrants negotiate their situation to experience or transform the sense of belonging within a small community?

Q4. How can social workers help these first comer Mexican immigrants create/support their own vision of community?

Significance of the Study

This study allows Stanislaus County and other comparable small communities to view how Mexican immigrants begin adapting, connecting, and growing within the community and how the community can more effectively contribute to connecting and embracing new immigrants. This study also looks at current resources, networks, activities that new immigrants engage in to experience community support and genuine communal connectedness. Moreover, the study brings an awareness to how Mexican immigrants partner and coexist within the communities of Stanislaus County. The study may assist to design more comprehensive assistance programs or community resources based on the immigrants' perspectives and aspirations. This study should also influence the theoretical assumptions about the immigrants' processes of adaptation into their new country of residence by exploring their own cultural resilience and personal perspective. As a result, social workers, clinicians, community-based programs, political and community leaders and advocates will be

able to focus their practice, resources, and plans to empower first comer Mexican immigrants' personal domains thereby enhancing their ability to thrive within their new community environments. The study also gives a voice to new Mexican immigrants by providing the opportunity to share what has made them feel part of their small communities and identify areas where they feel more support is needed to enhance overall belonging and wellbeing. This study provides insight into how Mexican immigrants change and adapt to the existing new living conditions, roles, and expectations of the new culture. Lastly, this study allows community base programs that serve Mexican immigrants to strengthen families living in small communities through services offered.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review focuses on the complexity of being a Latin immigrant in a new culture and environment and the dynamics of cultural identity during the process of adaptation and acculturation. The literature review (a) describes the immigrants' perceived experiences in the community; b) discusses the literature related to building a sense of belonging and community; c) identifies the contextual elements of social integration and resilience for immigrants; and, d) analyzes cultural framework practices that social workers may use with Latino immigrant communities.

Immigrants' Perceived Experiences in the Community

Wilson (2010) argues that the culture of Mexican immigration is attached to the culture of attitudes and norms towards a world of capitalism that has changed their communities and forced immigrants to leave their families to support and provide for them. Unfortunately, immigrants are often blamed for the social and economic ills of the entire nation; therefore, "any exclusion, restriction, and actual mistreatment of them are gradually accepted as normal" (Chacon, 2011, p. 471). Ward (2009) asserts that social exclusion has centered on trying to fit the immigrants into the established cultural and social models that do not consider the personal and life experiences of the immigrants rather than looking at overall social structure.

Oftentimes, Latinos are excluded from the decision-making process within social structures, which leads to marginalization surrounding issues of acculturation, discrimination, citizenship, anti-immigrant sentiment and public policy. The experiences of racial discrimination, social status, and the controversial economic and political challenges have excluded immigrants from civil engagement, as it has been encapsulated in a language of the dominant culture (Tucker & Santiago, 2013). In their 2013 research, Ayon and Becerra explored how Mexican immigrants perceive community when anti-immigrant policies, discrimination and economic crisis are part of their daily lives. They found that Latino immigrant families experience discrimination, uncertainty, and lack of jobs. Ayon and Becerra (2013) also determined that Mexican immigrants live a constantly uncertain life. Mexican immigrants fear the increase of political, institutional, and community discrimination, which may increase family separation, barriers to health care, and lack of job availability.

Other research highlights the social experiences that immigrants have as they arrive to the community. Cheung et al. (2011) explored the perceived experiences of Latino day worker immigrants living in Houston, Texas who reported feelings of “anguish, anxiety and desperation” related to family separation and the inability to obtain a stable and fair job due to their undocumented statuses (p. 82). Cheung et al. (2011) also found that immigrants experience a sense of personal dissatisfaction, as they were not able to keep up with the surrounding society and culture’s structure, for not speaking English, not having transportation, and also lacking permanent housing.

Negi (2013) wanted to identify the psychological stressors that impacted the life of the Latino day workers and found that immigrants' overall health decays rapidly in accordance with the perceived feelings of discrimination and social isolation in their daily lives. These negative perceptions were noted by not being able to access health care, not enough protection from law enforcement, and being easily deported and exploited. Organista et. al. (2013) found that the wellbeing of Latino immigrants is also at risk as they live in conditions of high vulnerability and isolation. Latino day workers associated sadness, suffering, and anxiety with the lack of wellbeing and the risk of substance use and abuse. Documèt et al. (2015) found that Latino immigrants connect the experience of social isolation with their poor living conditions, loneliness, and hostile environments making them feel worried and stressed for their families while tending to cope by working longer hours and drinking alcohol.

Some researchers looked specifically at parent-child separation when examining immigrant circumstances. In doing so, Rusch and Reyes (2013) found that the immigrant parents who were separated from their families have higher levels of acculturative stress and the feelings of a possible but not secure reunification with their families were associated with higher levels of depression and unhealthy family functioning. The conflict between choosing stable work in an isolated environment or staying with their families with not too many opportunities in their natural communities makes immigrants experience high level of stress (Grzywacz, et al, 2005).

Social isolation is yet another issue for Latin immigrants. Hurtado-de-Mendoza et al. (2014) explored this topic further and found that not having social networks from the origin countries, not having too many friends, not being able to communicate or spend time with others, not engaging in different activities, and not having limited relationships with family members leads to increased reported feelings of social isolation. All of these markers for social isolation were connected with the immigrants' socioeconomic conditions (e.g., demanding jobs, climate of competition, no time to help others), environmental conditions (e.g., no space for fostering friends or meeting neighbors, structure and design of the neighbors in which people live, and station climates), and psychosocial struggles (e.g., difficulty building trust and emotional ties or relationships with others and controlling partners) (Hurtado-de-Mendoza et al., 2014).

In a similar qualitative study conducted with six male Mexican immigrants between the ages of 29 to 41 years from Petalcingo, Mexico, Prickett et al. (2012) found that male migrants who continually travel to Mexico and return to the United States experienced a strong sense of isolation and feelings of being invisible, and had self-conflicts for desiring recognition and respect, as they often lack a long-term residential base. A semi-structured interview was used to collect the information in this particular study. The immigrants reported that they faced economic and family dilemmas as they do not want to leave their families in Mexico, but have the need to immigrate to be able to provide for themselves and their families. They had a "great

desire for love, comfort and cultural acceptance experienced in the community of origin” (p. 66).

Menéndez and Novak (2010) captured the perceived experiences of prejudice and discrimination of Latino American immigrants in Indianapolis, a city with a high number of Latino immigrants. The data were collected from a non-random sample of 143 immigrants who came from Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean who completed a 101 closed-ended survey questionnaire. The reported prejudice experienced was associated with perceived dislike towards immigrants, indifference to the immigrants, in general, and residents’ unwillingness to connect with the immigrants. Discrimination was associated with the immigrants’ physical appearances and the inability to speak English, which may have influence with regard to obtaining a better job, renting a house, shopping more at stores, and visiting public spaces. Although social disparities that carry the process of migration-adaptation may result in difficulties, they can also mean for Latin immigrants the beginning of strengthening their lives within a new culture and society.

Building the Sense of Belonging and Community

Conceptualization of Community

Theodori (2005) posits that the term community is “an extremely elusive construct” (p. 662), as people conceptualize and describe it in different ways. The two most common terms used to describe community include the idea of being “territory-free” or “territory-based” (Theodori, 2005, p. 662). Territory-free groupings would not be linked to a specific geographical area and would include

connections of social groupings or networks. An example of a territory-free community would be the immigrant community, describing in general a large group of people with a common or shared experience of immigrating. A territory-based community would be anchored to a specific geographical region, such as immigrants from Northern Mexico (Theodori, 2005).

Schrivier (2011) notes that it is even more complex and difficult to define community because people frame the term community based on their life experiences and interactions with their environments. Hutchison (2003) elaborates that from the perspective of sociology, community has three elements: a) geographical area, b) social interaction, and c) common ties. Hutchison also puts forth a psychological perspective of community that includes similarities with others, independence, and mutual exchange to fulfill needs and experience the sense of belonging. Communities are important because they are the environments in which people grow and thrive.

The psychological sense of community is described as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (Boyd & Nowell, 2013, p. 108). The sense of belonging is defined “as a psychological concept related to the individual’s feelings of being part of the collective” (Itzhaky & Levy, 2002, p. 35).

The Immigrant and the Community

Considering the social and psychological impact of the community on the immigrant, research can then focus on these aspects of immigrant connectivity. Townley et al. (2011) argue that the study of the sense of community should consider human diversity and cultural dynamics as key aspects of belonging and that these attributes are not specific to a group but can overlap among groups of people. The sense of community was not only experienced with group members who shared the same ethnic background and values but within combined identities and mixed cultural contexts. From the same study, Townley et al. (2011) further suggested incorporating culturally-based community practices when working with immigrants in a new community.

Sense of Community and Ethnic Identification

Studying the phenomenon of social identity and social exclusion, Ward (2009) believes that identity does not only involve one's own awareness, but it is also constructed through other people's perceptions, reactions and assumptions. As migration affects aspects of personal and social identity, Szabo and Ward (2015) studied the mechanism underlying identity development of adult immigrants during acculturation. This was done by analyzing how the perceived social identity structures come in direct contact with the immigrants' cognitive abilities to deal with problems associated with acculturation. The researchers found that self-esteem, self concept clarity, and ethno-cultural conflict play a central role in identity development

during acculturation by either mediating or moderating immigrants' ability to cope with positive and negative outcomes.

Different researchers have highlighted the importance of ethnic identity during adaptation and acculturation within the community for groups other than Mexican immigrants. For example, Barry et al. (2000) studied how male Arabic immigrants confronted prejudice and stereotyping by the general public and media after their arrival to the United States. The researchers discovered that self-construal and ethnic identity pride were components of the psychological wellbeing and acculturation process for male Arabic immigrants. Similarly, Itzhaky and Levy (2002) found that maintaining high levels of self-esteem and sense of ethnic and cultural pride were two important elements for Ethiopian immigrants to ease the process of adaptation in their new host communities.

Murray and Dunn (1995) expressed concern about the rapid growth of residents among rural communities that have not yet built a sense of individual and community connectivity. The researchers believe communities that can express community actualization, by showing a state of collective identity, sense of belonging and the sense of fulfillment, have the ability to manage their own community affairs, and reduce dependency on the state interventions.

Johnson (2004) argues that the conceptualization of ethnic identity is essential for people to be differentiated. However, this differentiation can also create misconceptions of others and a distorted description of one's ethnic identity within society, as power and vulnerability have been associated with racial identity, making

people who associate with a particular minority group more vulnerable to draw or impose a negative or risk behavior.

Another noted consequence of being socially ostracized involves having a negative perception against new immigrants from long term residents. Cleaveland (2013) studied how the “new destinations” or places to which immigrants are moving, for Latino immigrant workers impacted their ability to integrate in society (p. 270). In the same body of research, Cleaveland further identified that the social perception of being a Latino immigrant in a new settlement looking for work and residency was accompanied by a negative portrayal of racial inferiority. This, then, damaged the sense of place identity for both new immigrants and long time residents, who are not accustomed to living near or sharing the neighborhood with other than predominantly white residents.

With respect to identity formation and adaptation in a cross cultural society, Baumeister and Muraven (1996) argue that identity is shaped through the process of adaptation within the social context. Proposing that identity is not just a passive acquisition as “individuals actively choose, alter or modify their identities based on what will be enable them to get along best in that context” (p. 405), thereby supporting the findings of Townley et al. (2011) with overlapping identities and identifications, as people are allowed to self-identify and modify based on needs and preferences. Kim (2015) theorized that people build an intercultural identity “through an extensive and intense exposure to, and interactions with, cultural elements beyond the familiar one’s “home” culture” (p. 6). However, Szabo and Ward (2015)

recognize that when immigrants have not had the opportunity to build a positive and coherent identity, which includes a deeper insight of finding a cultural home in a host society, immigrants experience acculturation identity crises. This leads to a cultural strain of sorts with immigrants constantly confronting and negotiating the demands of two different cultures.

The struggles of acculturation and self-identity have extended consequences in Mexican immigrant families and are well documented in a study by Partida (1996). The effects that immigration has on immigrant children include noted struggles to establish a sense of identity and belonging as they simultaneously are exposed to two divergent cultures. Children of immigrants begin to experience shame and humiliation as their parents are not able to provide the “knowledge” that is needed to integrate with their new social and cultural environment. This includes the knowledge of personal ownership or membership in the [primary] ethnic group and the support needed to support, bridge, and connect with themselves and others. “Parents and children begin develop a cultural identity in distinct and often divergent manner” (Partida, 1996, p. 246).

Immigrants’ Resilience and Social Integration

The attribute that people have of managing problems in difficult times and progressively functioning is called resilience (Raffaelli et al., 2012, p. 559). The term resilience has also been applied to both individuals and groups as they navigate the different social structures of society. “The growing emphasis on family and community resilience acknowledges that the family can be a resource for individuals

in times of stress but also recognizes the family as a functional unit in itself and the essential unit of community resilience” (Landau, 2007, p. 354). It is more and more recognized that communities are critical for individual resilience, as communities can become “enabling or entrapping niches” for their members (Schriver, 2011, p. 480).

Cardoso and Thompson (2010) found that the resilience of new immigrants is positively influenced when the acculturation process includes an understanding of the new social systems, including cultural differences. Cultural pride and family identity are the cornerstones that support the internal and external adaptation of the new immigrants. Internal adaptation includes the individual’s ability to personally adapt through coping and other internal measures while external adaptation is observed in the individual’s ability to physically adjust to the environment.

Family ties and connections are other factors related to both adaptation and transition for new immigrants. For immigrant parents, the sense of family is motivated by a better life for their children and continues through family life experiences. The sense of family as a protective factor to the demands of acculturation in immigrant families is rooted in traditions and rituals (Hancock, 2005). Cardoso and Thompson (2010) explain that, “cultural rituals and spiritual systems often reinforce ethnic and family identity and cultural pride” (p. 260). Bacallao and Smokowski (2007) detailed the family dynamics of Mexican families after the immigration experience. They found that the sense of family rooted in Mexican families could positively influence the lives of Mexican families living in the United States. Researchers noted that the emotional relationship between the

parents and children increased positively followed by mutual support to cope with the stressors and then motivation to succeed together in the new cultural system.

Another aspect of adaptation includes involvement in community. Chaskin (2001) explains, community capacity is a neighborhood model that attempts to incorporate meaningful resident participation in the change process, which is “based in a sense of community, a level of commitment among community members, the ability to solve problems, and access to resources” (p. 292). Garcia-Ramirez et al. (2011) note that acculturation begins by giving immigrants the opportunity to participate within their new context, which makes them feel a sense of belonging within the new society. Acculturative integration occurs when immigrants are able to reconstruct themselves in the new context according to their interest, values and needs, which links to “a self-construction process” put forth in the research of De la Mata and Cubero (2003) of the ability of the person “to a) create meaning and sense, and to act with intentionality; b) show reflexivity, or the capacity of thinking of oneself and society as a whole; and c) maintain one’s culture, which provides a symbolic system necessary to make sense of the new encounters” (as cited in Garcia-Ramirez, et al, 2011, p. 89).

Cultural Framework Practices

To increase overall sense of adaptation and belonging is not a quick fix, as communities and people change over time. It consequently requires professionals and communities to maintain a more accurate portrayal of the people they serve by constantly assessing their practices (Bermudez & Mancini, 2012).

Engstrom and Okamura (2007) argue that social services need to reconsider their practices as they have historically developed and solidified models of practice and a field of specialization without much regard to the challenges that immigrants encounter after they arrive to the United States. The research notes that social workers are in an ideal social and professional position to facilitate the transition of new immigrants and their families into their new environments. Social workers are vital because they “embrace empowerment and self determination as guiding principles” (p. 106), which are critical principles for immigrant adaptation.

Uttal (2006) proposes shifting the philosophy of service delivery for Latino immigrants from a client-centered to a community-based orientation by “culturally adapting the curriculum of programs, and removing-barriers to client participation” (p.251). Uttal (2006) also supports the idea of shifting the programs to a community holistic approach that could be more accessible and meaningful, but there is also a need to be culturally adapted to community-based expectations and conditions. A holistic approach program is based in the concept that the curriculum and the delivery of the program is subject to the characteristics, social conditions, and needs of the participants.

Chenoweth and Stehlik (2001) explored the role that human services and practitioners play in developing community resilience. They agree that the ability to overcome life adversity and changes in the community can be achieved by focusing more on communities rather than on specific services. On the other hand, social workers who may work in building resilience need to commit “to redress exclusion

and marginalization, principles of social justice and upholding self-determination for communities” (p.53). This is suggested to be done through building alliances in and among the community with practitioners who are already within the community and building partnerships with community members and groups.

To be able to support Mexican immigrants and their children, Ward (2009) believes that social workers need to understand the origin of the exclusion in order to understand the outcomes of inequality. Ward also asserts that social exclusion is a process rather than a condition, as social exclusion may be perceived as a form absent of material good, such as being poor, rather than an emotional aspect, such as being discriminated against. With a greater understanding of the origin of the exclusion, social workers can assist in identifying factors that can lead to more inclusion and minimize the impact of exclusionary processes in practice. Bernal and Domenech Rodriguez (2009) invite researchers, practitioners, and social workers to not just be culturally competent but be culturally attuned, by allowing and inviting people to be the collaborators or consultants of what really matters for them.

There is noted to be limited to no research on the meaning of belonging and the sense of community among first comer Latino immigrants. Therefore, the purpose of this research was to capture some of the many dimensions, factors, and components that influence the sense of belonging for immigrants in terms of experiencing challenges associated with immigration and social status that create barriers to feeling part of and engaging in the local community for Mexican immigrants.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Overview

A number of research studies examine the reasons behind immigrants coming to the United States. The government is able to predict the numbers of immigrants that have and will enter the United States every year, as well as how much productivity and revenue immigrants will bring to the sustainability of agriculture and urban development (Hertz & Zahniser, 2013). There are also a number of quantitative research studies focusing on immigrant acculturation and the social barriers that many immigrants may experience when they arrive to the United States. However, there is little first-hand information of how new Mexican immigrants living in small communities experience their new cultural context to process cultural adaptation and the sense of belonging within their new community. This exploratory study used a qualitative design to explore both aspects of acculturation and connection to community supports for new Mexican immigrants. The primary research questions that guided this study are as follows.

Q1. How do first comer Mexican immigrants perceive community?

Q2. What types of ethnic activities do first comer Mexicans immigrants practice to overcome cultural displacement and how do they build their own sense of belonging and identity?

Q3. How do first comer immigrants negotiate their situation to experience or transform the sense of belonging within a small community?

Q4. How can social workers help first comer Mexican immigrants create/support their own vision of community?

Research Design

A qualitative research study was the most appropriate methodology for this study because it gave the opportunity for individuals to share personal and group experiences using their own words, perspectives, and vocabularies. Qualitative research allowed for a deeper understanding of a social phenomenon within the participants' natural settings (Rubin & Babbie, 2014), which in this case included the newcomer immigrants' perceptions and experiences of community and belonging.

The qualitative design was more meaningful than a quantitative method in the case of this research. Qualitative research was able to explore people's meaningful events in life that have shaped their existences. It invited people to describe their personal views of their context to generate theoretically richer observations.

Qualitative research includes the implied subjectivity of qualitative research that allows for exploration of existing complex social phenomena (Rubin & Babbie, 2014).

Sample

Non probability sampling was used to obtain the sample. Non probability sampling does not use random techniques to recruit the participants (Rubin & Babbie, 2014). The researcher recruited the research sample using the snowball technique.

The snowball technique involved asking each research participant to identify other potential participants who also met the eligibility criteria described within this study. Snowball sampling was particularly helpful with this hard to find population.

The researcher was familiar with the community and recruited the first participant throughout his personal network, as this is a hard to reach population. Snowball sampling is noted more appropriate for qualitative research that has to do with minority and oppressed populations (Rubin & Babbie, 2014). Due to the qualitative nature of the study and the anticipated difficulty in recruiting this sample, the target sample size for this study was 10 to 15 participants.

The southeast part of Stanislaus County, which is comprised of small communities located around agricultural land with a large Hispanic population, was the target of this study. The city of Hughson was the primary focus of this study because it is geographically located between other small communities, which have a large number of foreign-born people and new immigrants. These new immigrants are specifically of Latino or Mexican background.

Specific eligibility criteria for study participants included: 1) they have to live within Stanislaus County; 2) they need to self identify as being from Mexico and be first generation immigrant from Mexico (born and raised outside the U.S.); and 3) have been living in the U.S. for six months to one year. Further, participants needed to be adults eighteen years old or older with no cognitive impairments in order to consent to participate in this study. The range of time of living in the United States

was the key to exploring the social and cultural experiences of immigrants in this study.

Data Collection and Instrumentation

The researcher developed an interview schedule, and information was obtained through a verbal interview process. The interview schedule was guided by a semi-structured approach. A semi-structured interview approach framed and focused the conversations by having organized and purposely open-ended questions that could help explore a topic or issue (Rubin & Babbie, 2014). It also allowed for probing and seeking clarifications, if needed. Interviews were recorded with written consent of participants in an effort to accurately capture the data.

The questions were open-ended questions. Open-ended questions allowed the interviewee to produce his or her own answer and when there was a short answer that did not provide in-depth information, the interviewer could help the interviewee to clarify or expand his or her answer by generating complementary questions (Rubin & Babbie, 2014).

The researcher reviewed the limited literature and relied on his professional and personal experiences with this community to develop the open ended questions (See Appendix A). The questions were read in Spanish by the researcher. Questions were then translated by the researcher from English to Spanish and the translated questions were reviewed by at least two community members to ensure correct use of language and semantic meaning. The interviews took place in a public space or the participants' homes, wherever the participant felt comfortable or free to speak. The

researcher anticipated and planned for the interviews to be an hour to an hour and a half long approximately, which allowed enough time to explain the purpose of the study to the participants and for them to share their personal experiences. All participants signed an informed consent. Data were collected between January 2016 to February 2016.

Data Analysis

In order to analyze the data obtained from the interviews, all data were transcribed into narrative form. The researcher utilized Neuman's plan for qualitative data analysis in order to analyze the data. Using Neuman's plan, data were organized into themes and categories in a five stage process including: sorting and classifying, open coding, axial coding, selective coding, and interpreting and elaborating. During the first stage, sorting and classifying, data were organized around the research questions. In the second stage, open coding, critical terms, key events, or themes were identified and guided by the literature and the participants' language. In the third stage, axial coding, data were examined again to see if any additional themes emerged. During the fourth stage, selective coding, data went through a final review in order to identify cases and quotes that illustrated specific themes. And in the fifth stage, interpretation and elaboration, major themes and categories were compared and contrasted to existing literature resulting in the formation of concepts and working theory.

Protection of Human Participants

The data were collected after approval from the UIRB. Participants in the research study were informed by the researcher about the purpose of the study upon initial contact. Participants in the study were informed that their participation was voluntary and they could choose to withdraw from the research study at any time without any penalty. The researcher also informed the participants that refusal to participate in the research study would not result in any penalties or loss of benefits. This ensured that the participants did not feel coerced into participating in the research study. Upon agreement to participate in this study, the researcher provided informed consent forms (see Appendix B), which provided further information explaining the research study as well as the participants' rights. The researcher explained to all participants that their identities would not be revealed in the research study at anytime. They were also informed that all findings in the research study would be shared in aggregate and no individual names and identifying information would be shared. It was also emphasized that all information would be protected from inappropriate disclosure under the law.

Participants were informed that all data would be kept in a locked cabinet at all times. The researcher also informed the participants that all tapes would be erased and notes and transcripts destroyed one year after the completion of the study. Since the research explored the experiences of undocumented immigrants or immigrants living in the community, some participants may have felt discomfort in talking about their experiences. To protect vulnerable participants, all participants were provided

with phone numbers and addresses of community groups and free Spanish counseling services in Stanislaus County that they could access in case such discomfort or distress occurred. Participants were also provided with names and phone numbers of the researcher and the researcher's advisor if they had further questions or concerns regarding the research study.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine how new Mexican immigrants, living in small communities, experience their new cultural context to process cultural adaptation and the sense of belonging within their new community. This research was guided by four research questions: a) How do first comer Mexican immigrants perceive community?; b) What types of ethnic activities do first comer Mexican immigrants practice to overcome cultural displacement, and how do they build their own sense of belonging and identity?; c) How do first comer immigrants negotiate their situation to experience or transform the sense of belonging within a small community?; and, d) How can social workers help first comer Mexican immigrants create/support their own visions of community? The domains of cultural identity, belonging, and acculturation were explored through these research questions. The findings of the four guiding questions along with an overview of the sample are presented in this chapter.

Overview of Sample

The eligibility criteria for this study played an important role in capturing Mexican immigrants' first experiences within small rural communities in the Central Valley of California. All participants self-identified as being from Mexico and being first generation immigrants who had lived in the U.S. for six months to one year. A total of nine Mexican adults were interviewed for this study. One participant was

interviewed via phone while the other eight participants were personally interviewed in their homes. Some of the participants identified having family locally and others identified having friends nearby from their origin country, in their current communities.

First Comer Immigrants' Perceptions of Community

The first research question focused on how the participants perceived the community in which they live. Two major themes emerged when looking at immigrants' perceptions of the community, which included feelings of being isolated and the feelings of not being able to interpret the new culture where they live that created barriers to connecting with their communities.

Isolation

One major theme that emerged was the isolation experienced by the first comer immigrants. Five of the nine participants described having feelings of social isolation living in their current local communities. Not knowing anyone, not knowing where to go to meet people, the empty streets where no one was walking all contributed to the feelings of isolation. Direct quotes from the participants that illustrate this theme follow in Table 1.

Table 1

Participants' Direct Quotes on Isolation

Participant	Statement
Participant 1	The community is small and there is not where to go, I do not know many people. I stay at home most of the time. The community seems to have many things but I feel that I am still alone.
Participant 2	I feel that there are not many people that I can meet; I do not know where to go. The community where I live seems to be quiet but at the same time empty. There are not many people walking or having conversations in the streets. I prefer to be alone because I do not see many people like me. Besides here there it is not easy to find people with your same characteristics. I would like to meet more people like me. Maybe a group or place that would celebrate more Latin activities, a place that could be easier to connect with. Most of the places here have writing or instructions in English.
Participant 3	I do not feel part of here; I do not feel much connected with the community. I do not know yet my neighbors yet. It is not normal here for people to walk or interact with their neighbors.
Participant 4	I feel that I do not have too much friends because I do not know many people. Sometimes I feel alone. I would like to find more things like in my country and connect with other Mexican groups and someone to help me to connect to the community, to know English, because it seems that people do not speak your language.
Participant 5	At this point, I do not have anything that makes me feel part of the community; I do not know many people and there are times that I ask myself what I am doing here. I try to go out, but I feel that I do not know anybody and the characteristics of the houses and transportation are different from where I come from.

Different Cultural & Social Practices

Four of the nine participants felt disconnected from social practices within the local communities, as they reported having difficulties interpreting or connecting with the cultural and social practices. For instance, one participant said, “It is a place with different customs and activities. They eat different, they dress different, and they have different customs. The community here looks big and there are many businesses.”

Another participant explained,

I think that the people who live here do not communicate among themselves. They do not live together, dialogue, and plan for what can be done in the community or a common project that needs to be done. Here it is very different.

A third participant shared,

There are not too many people who speak your language and the community seems to have more regulations and laws. People stay in their houses all the time. People do not interact among themselves. Everyone takes care of themselves; people do not help here.

A unique theme that emerged with regard to perception of community related to experiencing social exclusion. The participant who was interviewed by phone described being discriminated against, this participant said,

Well, when we are with the whites, they tend to discriminate against us and more when someone is new here. Sometimes there is a lot of discrimination. They look down on us as less than or when you go to the stores or do something in the community. I do not speak English well and they look down on us like they laugh at us. And more when you do not know too many people, they look down on us and it is discrimination from the Americans.

What Makes First Comer Mexicans Feel Connected to the Community

When participants were asked what could make them feel part of the community, a common theme related to a sense of “neighbor rejection” emerged. Five of the nine participants explained that even if they wanted, they experienced their local community as not wanting to connect with them. The participants shared that they would feel like a part of the community when they were able to interact with other people within the community. All these participants noted the importance of speaking English in their feedback. For example, one participant shared:

A community for me is where I can interact with more people, feel free to go anywhere and move around the community. Here I do not see how to go to one place to another, I do not know English and I am afraid to speak because I see that people do not want to speak with you.

Another participant explained,

Something that it could make me feel part of the community will be to speak English. I do not speak English. Knowing English will make me to know the community. It is difficult to interact with people when you cannot express yourself.

Other quotes included:

To feel welcome in the community and my neighbors having the desire to speak with me. I would like to feel more welcome, I feel that people do not want to speak to me. There is not interest for people to know you. I do not speak the language, and I do not know where to go.

I think that speaking English is important because it helps you to communicate with the other people. It also allows you to learn what is available for work and everything else. It allows communicating with the other people, like the Americans.

To feel part of the community, what I need is to learn English. Where I live is fine, but when you do not know how to speak English they isolate you. And when the Latinos’ children speak English, it also isolates me. I have a place

where to learn English, but I do not assist because I do not have time or for other reasons.

Need for Emotional Support

Another common theme that emerged with regard to what would make the immigrant feel connected to the community identified the role that their families played in providing them emotional support. The participants explained that communities offer emotional support; however, they found this support only through their families. Two of the nine participants found emotional support in their families. For example, one participant shared,

With respect to me, I do not feel a connection to the community. Only me and family... with my family I feel support. I feel that they help me, but there is not support outside of my family.

Another participant shared,

I have been living here in this community for a short period of time. I feel connected to the community through my family because they motivate me to continue working hard. I also would like to visit the community with my family without being afraid. Yes, my family connects me with the community. I think that my family can help me connect with the community; my family is my support because I am not alone. It gives me more security having a family. Without family it will be more difficult to be living in this community.

Access to Resources

Another theme that emerged with regard to what could make the participants feel like they were a part of the community related to accessing resources. Two of the nine participants felt connected to the community when they accessed community services, such as the health clinic, resource center, libraries. For example, one participant said, "Having access to libraries or having support for immigrants, and my

family to learn English and be able to interact with the rest of the community.”

Another participant added,

Well, for example, someone is part of the community when someone goes to the clinic, when someone needs something for their children, when they are sick, or they need vaccinations. For example, I am going to the resource center and there is a program for pregnant women. They watch your children and they teach how to feed your children. I think it is good.

Owning a House

A unique theme that related to the sense of connection with the community was having a home, this participant shared,

Right now I am renting this house, but I would like to have my own house for my family in the future. I think that people begin connecting with the community when they have access to house payments and other services.

An Inclusive Community

When participants were asked what community means for them, four of the nine participants centered their answers on a more inclusive community. Two participants shared the word “together” while they defined community as “It is a place where a lot of people live and interact together...live together and help each other” and “a place where people live and work together.” Two participants included the word “we” in their answers, “Community is a place where we can live...a place where to work and live.” and “it is a place where we live, some people have work and some people do not.”

Ethnic Activities to Overcome Cultural Displacement

The second research question explored the role ethnic activities played in participants trying to overcome cultural displacement and build their own sense of

belonging and identity. All participants had difficulties framing the concept of ethnic activities within their cultural identity. All nine participants requested multiple times for the researcher to explain what “ethnic activities” included. After the researcher addressed the participants’ questions, two major themes emerged: Religion and family cooking traditions.

Religion

Six participants identified religion and religious practices as an important ethnic activity that is helping them to overcome cultural displacement as well as building a sense of belonging. Within religion and religious practices, they identified going to church, reading the Bible.

One participant found personal satisfaction in religion:

I used to go out and merchandise my things to live in Mexico, and I also was going to church. Now where I live I do domestic jobs, and I like it. I still go to the church meetings and I feel very satisfied. I feel happy when I read the Bible because I find things that make me feel better here.

Another participant shared,

The church gives me wisdom, and I go to have more knowledge with and throughout the Bible or through the church. The church gives me connection with God and the people who are around me and to be with them.

One participant feels that religion helps her maintain her personal identity, as this participant is still trying to interact with the community, saying, “because when I know more about God, I can live more peacefully with myself. Well, it gives me tranquility in regards my family and with respect to connecting with the community.”

Another participant explained,

I just began going to church, and I feel better. When I am not able to go to church, I turn the radio to a Christian radio station and I heard many things that can help me to live better. I used to feel sad because I did not know anyone. But since I am going to church I have been able to meet more people. Sometimes the people from church they come and visit me. Now I teach about God, and I enjoy church because my children doing much better.

Family Cooking Traditions

Another theme that emerged in response to this question related to the role of food in the culture. Three participants noted the importance of the community or family coming together to prepare and eat food:

In Mexico we have the custom to make tortillas, and I have not lost the custom of making tortillas, and I always I make my tortilla and food. We have the custom of making the food together. I enjoy family dinner time because it is the time where all my family is together and we all have a good time eating and talking. I just recently found a group that meets and talked about family. I am learning how make more delicious and nutritious food for my family.

I came here to work and help my family. Yet, I still continue cooking like it was in my country. I really enjoy doing this. Even though my job is hard because I work in the field, I come home and I begin cooking because I find it very connecting to my roots and family traditions. I continue cooking and eating as I did before, tortillas and peppers.

I continue taking care of my family, and I continue cooking. I am Mexican and I like to cook just like I did in Mexico and enjoy being at home with my family. Sometimes, friends come to the house, and we all eat here together. I feel that doing this makes us keep our cultural identity and connects us with other people in the community.

Participants had an even more difficult time contextualizing the term “cultural identity” than the term “ethnic activities.” All participants had difficulties explaining how they kept their cultural identities living in the United States, but they associated the term more with ethnic activities as their responses matched what they had identified as their ethnic activities. There were many silent moments observed when

the participants trying addressing this question relating to their identities. Eight of the nine participants asked for a definition or meaning of cultural identity. All participants used the word “I do not know” or “I do not understand,” and “I feel I am the same person” or “I am the same person” in their responses to this particular question thereby indicating that they are not recognizing that the surrounding cultural context is impacting them in any way.

Immigrants’ Negotiations and Building of their Sense of Belonging

The third research question focused on how immigrants negotiated their personal situations to experience or transform their sense of belonging within a small community. The two major themes that emerged during this exploration were access to the community and job opportunity.

Access to the Community

All participants like and appreciate the small town atmosphere in the central valley, as they can link it to what was familiar with their communities from their countries of origin. They liked the small size of the communities they are living in now also due to the easy access to service or resources they might need. The participants’ responses below capture this theme:

I feel good because the community is small. It makes me feel more relaxed and tranquil. The place where I lived in Mexico was not too big, and when I came here I felt good because this place is quiet compared with other communities.

Even though I live in a small community; I have not had any problem with anyone. It is a Latin community. I am fine there. Over there, I do not need anything; there is a basketball court, stores and the schools. If you want to learn English, there is everything there, but I haven’t wanted to go.

The community where I live is small, and I do not know many people. However, I like the community because I can walk to the stores without the need of having transportation, and the school and the churches are close too.

Well, the community is fine like it is. The little town is quiet and it is safe. You go out and there is no fear of being robbed. Besides there are many services, for example the bank, the clinic and many stores. Now, I feel more confident, but when we just got here, I felt sad because we did not know anyone. You feel that you can not trust, but as you know more people and the services, you feel better.

Job Opportunities

Another theme that related to this question reflected that the size of the community did not matter to them. Four of the nine participants do not have a preference of living in small or large communities as long as there are job opportunities. Participants noted the following:

Living in a small community does not affect me, only if my economic condition is affected because it is how I am able to support my family. Work gives me the opportunity to provide for the future of my family. Work helps me to stay here and I know that without money I will be immigrating. Family helps me stay motivated to work.

Now I live in this place, I am here to work, and work now is part of my life. I like the town, it is fine, and I like it because there is work, lots of work. My children are going to the school. My children belong here, they were born here. My time is more dedicated to my work and children. It does not affect me to live in a small community because everything is close, the store, the market, the park and the school.

The thing that makes me feel part of the community is my job and having a fair rent. If I have a job it does not matter where I live. Besides, I am accustomed. Where I am from there are extreme problems. The community that one has here can not be compared with what is in here...because I am coming from where there is nothing. The community may be small, but it has what you do not have in your country. Therefore, it does not affect me if the community is small or large.

Well I have a family, and when it is a seasonal job, there are different jobs that surround this community, for that reason I think it is a good place to live, being safe and secure to find a job. It has the school and the clinic.

Role of the Social Worker

Finally, the last research question asked participants how social workers could help first comer immigrants in adapting and adjusting to the changes and challenges faced by a new immigrant in this area. The two major themes that emerged included connecting with the immigrants and having bilingual services. Four of the nine participants want social workers to know more about them and their unique situations and be their voice and advocate for them. They want the social workers to be more visible and help them with basic needs. For example, one participant shared, “At least with housing, immigrants need help to find where to live, give them blankets and interact with them to feel connected with the community.” Another participant added, “Maybe, if they can be more visible because I have not seen one yet.” Other participants explained,

By knowing about the immigrants, they can change a lot, through asking and listening to the town and telling to the government about us. Nobody is going to listen to us. Every time we are going to be seen as immigrants. We are not going to show who we are. A social worker can help us to tell our story.

Another participant shared,

Social workers should be more understandable about our situation like immigrants, having more to time to meet us and have more availability for us to tell what we need. I would like to live in a place where people could share their ideas and problems and to live all together.

Three of the nine participants believe that having more people who speak English and Spanish could help immigrants establish in the community.

When you are new here, everything seems not to be accessible, or we do not know where to go. I would like to have more places in the community where people could speak both languages. The people who just came do not have a place to live or do not know how to begin their lives again.

I remember going to an office and there was a lady, who spoke only English, and because we did not speak English, she could not help us. She asked us to bring a person to help us. She said that she could not help us until we bring a person who speaks English. I do not like that kind of people. I would like to have more available people to help you and have better attitude.

In the situation that we have, we bring children of different ages; they are not coming speaking any English. My son is in high school and English is difficult for him to understand it. I would like a person who could help those children. They are suffering because everything is in English. They get overwhelmed, and they cannot develop because they do not understand. I would like a person that could help them. It will be great for me and other immigrants who just came to this community. As a , we do not know a lot of programs or support groups that exist in the community. We do not know them when there is not anyone to tell us which groups are here, this or that, we do not know them. If we begin knowing the services, we can begin little by little to know about our community.

One participant believes that social workers can help immigrants to understand their new environments and connect them with social opportunities.

To have a community where people can have an economic stability and have no fear for going out with my family and having friendship with my neighbors. A social worker could help the immigrant to know the community, what benefits that exist for people like me. Where I need to go to connect with social services and opportunities.

Based on their life experiences, participants want social workers and other community providers to understand more about their social situations and needs.

Summary

Participants expressed difficulties understanding their new communities. The participants' responses regarding immigrants' perceptions about the community illustrated how immigrants have difficulty interacting and interfacing with their new

communities, as they do not speak English, are not familiar with the social and cultural practices, and experience isolation. Participants described how the sense of feeling of rejection affects the overall feelings of being connected to the community or feeling a sense of belonging within the new community. Religion and family-food connections are the main ethnic activities that participants identified as helping immigrants cope in their new communities. Participants also described how the characteristics of small communities allowed participants more ease of access to the community and how job opportunities impacted decisions to stay in a community. Finally, participants shared how social workers can help Mexican immigrants by connecting and engaging with the population directly, particularly in their primary language, and being a voice for them and advocating for them.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate how new Mexican immigrants, living in small rural communities, experience and connect to the communities in which they live. There were four research questions that guided this study: a) How do first comer Mexican immigrants perceive community?; b) What types of ethnic activities do first comer Mexican immigrants practice to overcome cultural displacement, and how do they build their own sense of belonging and identity?; c) How do first comer immigrants negotiate their situation to experience or transform the sense of belonging within a small community?; and, d) How can social workers help first comer Mexican immigrants create and/or support their own visions of community?

This chapter summarizes the major findings of the study and compares the findings with the findings of existing literature. The implications this study may have for social work practice and policy are described, and the chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the study and recommendations for future research.

Major Findings and Existing Literature

The first question examined how first comer Mexican immigrants perceive community. Participants' perceptions of the community were connected to their life experiences living in their respective communities in the United States. The first major finding of this study, with regard to the perception of community, was

participants' feelings of being socially isolated. The feelings of social isolation were identified as not having a place to go (other than their homes), being alone, seeing empty streets, and not having any local friends. Negi (2013) found that Latino day workers experience high levels of isolation due to their life situations and not having other family with them. The experience of social isolation is a factor that influences a sense of connectivity to the community for most Mexican immigrants. Even though most of the first comer Mexican immigrants, in this study, have at least one family member with them, the immigrants still reported a feeling of social isolation.

Documèt et al. (2015) found that the health of Latino immigrants is compromised when they experience a sense of loneliness and isolation. It was noted, in this study, that social isolation was related to living in a perceived hostile and anti-immigrant environment. The participants shared perceiving an unfriendly surrounding environment, and they struggled with not knowing many people besides their family with which to connect in the community. Similarly, Worby and Organista (2013) found that the overall wellbeing of the Latino population is at risk as they experience sadness, and suffering and anxiety related to their high vulnerability and social isolation. It seems that first comer Mexican immigrants are impacted by the differences in the local communities they live in, in the U.S., and their communities back home, especially due to social isolation and no place or person to whom they can voice their concerns. This places them at risk to develop health issues, which was not found in this study, due to the recency of their immigration.

Most of the existing literature related to studying social isolation and adaptation has involved Mexican immigrants who have lived in the United States more than five years or longer, so there is limited literature available to compare the findings of this study with a primary focus on people who have been in a community less than one year. This gap of knowledge about the first generation of Mexican immigrants does not allow effective support of the large number of immigrants that are living and are arriving to the United States searching for a place to live and struggling to adapt to their new communities.

In addition to social isolation, participants also identified “neighbor rejection” as being part of their experiences when trying to belong to a community. Participants described it as people in the community not having the desire to connect with them. Participants believed that connecting with their neighbors could help them to connect to the larger community. The participants also expressed concerns that not speaking English may limit this connection. All participants have struggled to experience a sense of community as they do not know how to begin establishing connections within a community that resists engaging with them. Mendez and Novack (2010) report that the unwillingness for local residents to connect with immigrants was associated with the social prejudice against immigrants’ physical appearances and the inability to speak English, which then also influences getting a job, renting a house, and being more exposed to public spaces. Both the experienced feelings of being socially isolated and the sense of neighbor rejection limited participants from fully embracing, connecting, or attempting to participate in the surrounding community.

Even though the participants experienced difficulty integrating with the community, participants in this study did not lose the hope of eventually being part of the larger community.

The second research question examined the types of ethnic activities first-comer Mexican immigrants practice to help overcome cultural displacement and how they build their own sense of belonging and identity. Participants identified religion and religious practices as an important ethnic activity that helps them overcome cultural displacement. Religious practices help new-comer Mexican immigrants to adjust to and cope with the new environment, build a sense of community, and maintain or preserve their identities. Religion and religious practices give participants personal satisfaction, wisdom, and build their personal identities and relationships with others in the community. Sanchez et al. (2014) found that recent Latino immigrants who had a religious community before they came to the United States had higher levels of post-immigration acculturative stress as they tend to lose their religious communities and supports when they move to their new host communities, contrary to those who get connected to a religious group after their arrival to the United States. Stacciarini et al. (2014) noted that many Latino female immigrants who experienced social discrimination and racism in their communities felt safe, welcomed, and accepted in their respective churches. Negi (2011) found that religious practices such as praying helped Latino day workers stay motivated to look for work despite the hardships endured. By being involved with the church, Latino day workers have better social networks and better moral and emotional

support through their pastor and other church members, which makes Latino day workers less vulnerable to develop mental health and substance abuse problems (Negi, 2011). This finding indicates that, before or after immigration, church affiliation is important for new Latino immigrants to cope with their new environments. It also implies that it is necessary to connect new-comer immigrants with their preferred religious practices, if needed or desired by the immigrant. Through the church and its membership, first comer Mexican immigrants could connect to other people with similar life and social situations and possibly decrease the risk of mental health and substance abuse related conditions while gaining the benefit of social and spiritual support.

The third research question examined how first comer immigrants negotiate their situations to experience or transform the sense of belonging within a small community. It was found that all participants preferred to live in small communities, as there is more ease of movement and access to the elements of and within the community. Participants also preferred to live in small communities because small communities have some similarities to their native neighborhoods in Mexico. This similarity with their country of origin's communities made the immigrants feel more relaxed, safe, and confident. Within a small community, the immigrants report having easy access to schools, stores, and community supports. This finding is consistent with research by Valdivia and Dannerbeck (2009) where it was found that Mexican immigrant women prefer to settle in small communities where they have good feelings of security, have access to health care, and can keep the family

together. On the other hand, Valdez, et al, (2013) found that the Mexican immigrants who come from small towns and communities in Mexico have a longing for the same in their new environments within the United States, where they have a sense of community among neighbors and “a carefree environment to raise their children” (p. 283). It seems that, in addition to the social aspects of the community, the size of the community and its similarities to the country of origin also contribute to creating a sense of community for newly arrived immigrants.

The final major finding in this study related to the question of how social workers can help immigrants in connecting to and engaging with the community. Participants asked that social workers learn more about them as individuals and their unique situations, including giving a voice to new immigrants who may not know the language or culture of the surrounding community. Participants also asked that social workers be more “visible” within the community to help link s to resources for basic needs, such as healthcare, and housing. Ward (2009) argues that in order to help Mexican immigrants it is important that social workers understand the source of marginalization leading to social isolation. Based on the empirical-based principles for culturally competent practice with Latinos, Gelman (2004) suggests that social workers need to create relationships, understand the context of the individuals, address the clients’ needs, and adjust their social practices to be more effective and culturally competent. It implies that social workers need to meet the immigrant where they are at in that particular moment with regard to adjustment and needs rather than superimposing a generalized approach when working with this particular

population. It is also critical for social workers to take into consideration the macro levels factors that lead to these experiences and feelings, for example, social isolation, discrimination, neighbor rejection, etc. in order to be able to effectively help this community connect and feel a part of the larger community. This may be done by engaging with and creating spaces for this population that has been isolated and marginalized as members of the community for them to organize and advocate for their needs in collaboration with social workers.

Implication for Social Work Practice and Policy

This qualitative study explored how new first comer Mexican immigrants living in small rural communities experience and connect to the communities in which they now live. Findings suggest that more connection is needed to and within the immigrant community as a whole, especially within the population of Mexican immigrants who verbalize feeling isolated and disconnected from both services and the community as a whole. First of all, the findings of this research can provide social workers with a better understanding of the lives and the struggles that first comer Mexican immigrants experience in their communities. The findings can also help social workers to be more culturally sensitive towards first comer Mexican immigrants who want to be part of the local community, but they are struggling to adapt to and understand their new environments.

The findings of this study indicate that first comer immigrants want to participate and join with their communities. The personal need that immigrants have can be utilized as a window of opportunity for social workers and other service

providers to begin engaging with first comer immigrants who may be at risk of developing future mental or psychological problems. These potential health concerns invite social agencies to incorporate community policies for individualized service and health promotion that can support the wellbeing for first comer Mexican immigrants. Agencies then can revise and modify their regulatory and compliance policies to reinforce the wellbeing of the first comer Mexican immigrants. Agencies may begin by opening public forums in Spanish within impacted communities and having more opportunity for immigrants to share their stories, ideas, and concerns with the goal of gathering participant data, understanding specific needs, and then designing services around those needs.

These findings also bring awareness that first comer immigrants bring cultural assets to their communities such as their religious practices and cultural traditions that reinforce immigrants' cultural identities and help to overcome feelings of cultural displacement. Drawing on the immigrants' own strengths and cultural resources, social workers can then act as brokers supporting already existing internal cultural assets.

The above mentioned micro level suggestions are meant to serve as immediate short term interventions. However, these would be insufficient on their own in addressing the real underlying issues of social isolation, discrimination, and neighbor rejection. In terms of macro social work practice, social workers can assist in the facilitation of community organizing driven by the immigrant community members themselves with the aim of increasing awareness about the immigrant community and

helping them build a community that they envision and that would give them the sense of belonging and connection that they crave. This would require active community organizing and community building on the part of social workers and grass roots workers.

In terms of policy implication, policies thus far have been dictative and presumptive leading to further marginalization of the immigrant communities through negative portrayal and subsequent noncompliance with implemented policies. Policies need to take an inclusive stance that involves the immigrants' voices and needs and also considers effective integration. The pre-existing reactive and defensive policies thus far have contributed to the negative perceptions of immigrants. Social workers can collaborate with immigrant populations to advocate for more inclusive immigrant policies and help in the implementation of the same.

Limitations of the Study

One major limitation of this exploratory study was finding the participants. Participants did not readily come forward to participate in this study or identify as a new immigrant. When the participants were identified and interviewed many of them did not engage fully during the interview process, as their responses were noted to be brief. Participants agreed to participate and were given full disclosure about the study, its expectations, and protection of human participants, but they showed resistance to openly talk about their personal lives, circumstances, and experiences. Another limitation was the level of the complexity of the words contained in some questions such as "connectedness," "belonging," "insight," and "cultural identity."

All participants seemed to struggle with comprehending these more complex or unfamiliar words, which would subsequently narrow participants' discussions.

Recommendation for Future Research

Ideally, it may be important for future research to consider first engaging with the participants and building personal rapport and trust because participants are concerned about vulnerability and sharing information that can put them and their immigration status at risk in this country, as the personal situation of the immigrant could be discovered or revealed. As it is not always possible, the participants should also have the opportunity to be interviewed by telephone as a way to create a safe and anonymous environment to decrease anxiety with the possibility of increasing participation in the study. One interview was conducted over the phone, and it was noted that the participant seemed more at ease to speak without stopping or thinking about what was being said. The participant who was interviewed by phone also stated that he hoped his responses would be able to help other immigrants, which is a comment that no other participants shared.

Future research needs to take into consideration designing an interview guide that has less complex terms or terms that participants can easily associate with. Even though this researcher is familiar with the immigrant community, the terms used did not resonate with the participants. Therefore, doing a quick pilot study to explore the understanding of the questions or terms used might be helpful in future studies, with a particular focus on the lexicon used in the questions themselves.

Considering the difficulty in findings participants and their reluctance in participating and sharing openly, it is recommended that a more collaborative and anti-oppressive methodology, such as participatory action research, be used to conduct future research with this population. This research methodology “allows a disadvantaged participant to define their problems, define the remedies desired, and take the lead in designing the research” (Rubin & Babbie, 2014, p. 476). This research also includes a mutual sharing and participation between the researcher and the participant. Using this methodology with first comer Mexicans immigrants will provide participants with a lead role in the research rather than feeling that they are being the objects of critique and give them a sense of ownership over the research. A PAR study might also help shed more in-depth light on the topic as the design of the study, the questions to be asked, and the data collection techniques will all be determined in partnership among all the stakeholders.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. How do first comer Mexican immigrants perceive community?
 - a. How would you describe the community where you live?
 - b. What does a community mean to you? Please explain.
 - c. What makes you feel that you are part of a community?
 - d. How do you experience the small community where you live?
 - e. Do you belong to any local community groups or supports? If yes, which ones? How do they connect to your sense of belonging/community?
2. What types of ethnic activities do first comer Mexican immigrants practice to overcome cultural displacement and how do they build their own sense of belonging and identity?
 - a. What type of ethnic activities do you feel connected to and are part of your life?
 - b. Do you practice your ethnic activities in the community where you live now? Please explain
 - c. Do you feel that these ethnic activities connect you more to the local community or to your way of life? Please explain.
 - d. What do you do to keep your cultural identity?

- e. What type of activities gives you more insight about yourself and your community?
 - f. What activities do you engage in to experience community connectedness?
 - g. Are there any other activities that are beneficial for you or for others in your community?
3. How do first comer immigrants negotiate their situation to experience or transform the sense of belonging within a small community?
- a. How does living in a small community affect your ability to integrate or connect to those around you?
 - b. Are there any social supports that are contributing to your ability to connect to the larger community?
 - c. What are you doing personally to experience or transform your sense of belonging to the local community?
 - d. What would you like to have in your community to experience the sense of welcoming or belonging?
4. How can social workers help first comer Mexican immigrants create/support their own vision of community?
- a. What is your vision of community?

- b. How could a social worker help your current situation or help others in adapting and adjusting to the changes and challenges faced by a new immigrant?

APPENDIX B

FORMULARIO DE LA ENTREVISTA

1. ¿Como los primeros inmigrantes Mexicanos perciben la comunidad?
 - a. ¿Como describiría la comunidad donde usted vive?
 - b. ¿Que es lo que una comunidad significa para usted? Por favor, explique.
 - c. ¿Que es lo que le hace sentirse parte de una comunidad?
 - d. ¿Como experimenta la pequeña comunidad donde usted vive?
 - e. ¿Pertenece a alguno de los grupos locales de la comunidad o de apoyo? Si es verdad, ¿Cuales son? ¿Cómo estos se conectan con su sentido de pertenencia/comunidad?
2. ¿Que tipo de actividades étnicas practican los primeros inmigrantes Mexicanos para superar el desplazamiento cultural y como ellos construyen su propio sentido de pertenencia e identidad?
 - a. ¿En que tipo de actividades étnicas se siente conectado y son parte de su vida?
 - b. ¿Usted practica sus actividades étnicas en la comunidad donde ahora vive? Por favor, explique.

- c. ¿Usted siente que estas actividades étnicas lo conectan más con la comunidad local o su forma de vivir? Por favor, explique.
 - d. ¿Que es lo que usted hace para mantener su identidad cultural?
 - e. ¿Que tipo de actividades le da mas entendimiento acerca de usted y de su comunidad?
 - f. ¿En que actividades usted se relaciona para experimentar conexión comunitaria?
 - g. ¿Hay otras actividades que son beneficiosas para usted o para otros en su comunidad?
3. ¿Como los primeros inmigrantes Mexicanos negocian su situación para experimentar o transformar el sentido de pertenencia dentro de una comunidad pequeña?
- a. ¿Como le afecta vivir en comunidad pequeña a su habilidad de integrarse o conectarse con aquellos que le rodean?
 - b. ¿Hay algún grupo social que esta contribuyendo a su habilidad de conectarse con la comunidad en general?
 - c. ¿Que esta usted haciendo personalmente para experimentar o transformar su sentido de pertenencia hacia la comunidad local?
 - d. Que es lo que le gustaría tener en su comunidad para experimentar el sentido de bienvenida o pertenencia?

4. ¿Como los trabajadores sociales pueden ayudar a los primeros inmigrantes Mexicanos a crear/suportar su propia visión de comunidad?
 - a. ¿Cuál es su visión de comunidad?
 - b. ¿Como podría ayudarle un trabajador social con su actual situación o ayudar a otros en adaptarse o ajustarse a los cambios o desafíos confrontados por un inmigrante recién llegado?

APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT

I, Juan Hernandez-Codallos, am a Masters student in the Master of Social Work Program at California State University, Stanislaus and am doing a research study for my Master's thesis. You are being requested to participate in a study with the purpose of learning about your life experiences as a first comer Mexican immigrant living in a small community in the United States. If you decide to volunteer you will be asked a series of questions with the purpose of encouraging you to discuss your experiences as thoroughly as you find fit for the interview. Interviews are expected to be an hour and a half long approximately in length.

You and others may benefit by utilizing your life experiences as a way to better serve first comer Mexican immigrants. The information collected will be protected from all inappropriate disclosure under the law. I will tape the interview with your permission and take notes to accurately capture your responses. All data collected will be maintained for one year after the completion of the study when all notes and transcripts will be shredded and tapes will be erased. When I report the findings of the study I will not mention any identifying information, such as your names or connect your name to your response.

There is no cost to you beyond the time and effort required to complete the procedure described above. Your participation is voluntary. If you decide not to participate in this study or choose to withdraw at any time there will be no penalty. You can also choose to not answer any question you do not want to answer. If you agree to participate, please indicate by signing below. If you have any questions about this study please contact me, Juan Hernandez-Codallos at (209) 918-8761 or my Thesis Chair, Dr. Shradha Tibrewal at (209) 667-3951. If you have any questions about your rights as a human participant, please contact Campus Compliance at 3784 or email IRBAdmin@csustan.edu. **If you experience any discomfort as a result of participating in this interview and talking about your personal experiences, you can call Stanislaus County Health Services Agency at (209) 558-7400 / 1-800-834-8171 for help free of charge.** Thank you for considering to participate in this study. Your time and input is appreciated.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX D

INFORME DE CONSENTIMIENTO

Yo, Juan Hernández-Codallos, soy un estudiante en el programa de la maestría de trabajo social de la Universidad del Estado de California, Stanislaus y estoy haciendo un estudio de investigación para completar mi tesis de maestría. Usted ha sido invitado (a) a participar en un estudio con el propósito de aprender acerca de sus experiencias como reciente inmigrante Mexicano que vive en una comunidad pequeña en los Estados Unidos. Si usted decide en participar voluntariamente se le preguntara una serie de preguntas con el propósito de motivarlo (a) para discutir sus experiencias y detallarlas como usted considere adecuado para la entrevista. Las entrevistas tienen un promedio de una hora y media.

Usted y otros podrían beneficiarse al utilizar sus experiencias personales de como se puede servir mucho mejor a recientes inmigrantes Mexicanos. La información coleccionada será protegida por ley de cualquier uso inapropiado. Yo grabare la entrevista con su permiso y tomare notas para capturar exactamente sus respuestas. Toda la información se mantendrá por un año después de completar el estudio hasta que todas las notas y transcripciones (récorde) sean destruidas y las grabaciones sean borradas. Cuando yo reporte los resultados del estudio, no mencionare ninguna información que identifique sus nombres o conecte su nombre con su respuesta.

No hay costo alguno mas allá que el tiempo y el esfuerzo requerido para completar el procedimiento arriba mencionado. Su participación es voluntaria. Si usted decide no participar en este estudio o decide retirarse en cualquier momento no habrá ninguna sanción. Usted también tiene la opción de no contestar alguna pregunta que usted no guste contestar. Si usted esta de acuerdo en participar, por favor indíquelo firmando abajo. Si usted tiene alguna pregunta sobre el estudio por favor de contáctame, Juan Hernández-Codallos al (209) 918-8761 o a mi asesor de tesis, Dra. Shradha Tibrewal al (209) 667-951. Si tiene alguna pregunta acerca de sus derechos como un participante humano, por favor contacte Campus Compliance al 667-3747 o mande un correo electrónico a IRBAdmin@csustan.edu. **Si usted experiencia cualquier molestia como resultado en la participación en esta entrevista y por hablar acerca de sus experiencias personales, usted puede llamar a la Agencia de los Servicios de Salud del Condado de Stanislaus al (209) 558-7400 / 1-800-834-8171 para ayuda sin ningún costo.** Gracias por considerar su participación en este estudio. Su tiempo y su información es agradecida.

Firma: _____ Fecha: _____