

Literature Review

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### **Statement of the Problem**

My research question is, “What are the challenges and supporting factors that immigrants face in the United States?” The purpose is to explore and discuss the different challenges and supporting factors that immigrants have when assimilating and moving into American neighborhoods. The limitations of the study include only foreign-born immigrants in the United States. Only adolescent and adult immigrants are being used in the study, specifically excluding infants and elderly persons due to the lack of information available for these populations.

With the increase of immigrant populations within the United States, it is important to be able to understand the needs of immigrants and their transition into American society. With the different cultures coming into the United States, being able to learn how each culture deals with stress, societal norms, and health factors is crucial in finding the most effective solutions to help this population. Understanding the different factors affecting immigrants and the ways they acculturate into American culture can assist workers in providing best practice options.

By studying the dynamics immigrants have with one another as well as with their neighborhoods, the social work profession can broaden its cultural competency and have a better understanding of the many cultures represented in the United States. Being able to help assist immigrants fit into their own community or within American neighborhoods enhances the well-being of these individuals and creates stronger community bonds. By giving immigrant communities access to resources that enhance their wellbeing, we can ensure that they become active members of society. By creating these stronger community bonds, American neighborhoods can help strengthen and support one another in times of need.

According to the United States Census Bureau, a total of 318,868 foreign-born immigrants were living in the United States in 2016. With so many immigrants living in America, the need

to understand this population is very important. Also, out of the about 44,000 immigrants surveyed, approximately 20% were not covered with any type of health insurance leaving almost 8000 people to deal with medical bills on their own (2016). Without the knowledge or skills to navigate through insurance and high medical bills, immigrants can avoid seeking treatment in order to avoid the hospital bills. By understanding the limitations that immigrants have within the healthcare system, social workers can work on creating better policies to assist such populations.

Having lived in several different countries, I have had the opportunity to live and learn about different cultures and societies. One of the countries I lived in was Yemen, located in the Middle East, where I lived for approximately eight years. When the Arab Spring started in 2010, I was able to see how it affected individuals as well as the entire country. Many Yemenis fled the country in search of stability, resources, and sought asylum or refugee status in the United States or other western countries. Many of these Yemeni refugees and immigrants were placed in Dearborn Michigan creating a large immigrant community. Many other Arab populations have also been relocated to Dearborn as well as many other cities across the country.

Due to my personal connection with Yemenis, I am interested in seeing what the challenges are that face moving to such a different environment, culture, and society. I am also curious to see what programs and methods have shown to be beneficial in helping immigrants assimilate into American culture and fit into American society.

If immigrants move to the United States without having any knowledge of the culture and language, it can limit their ability and chances to receive different resources available in their communities and neighborhood. Without the needed skills to find resources, it can make things difficult for immigrants to fit into society and increase stress on the individuals. As many people

know, stress has been shown to cause health-related issues and without the skills to find resources, can complicate the issue.

### **Problem Exploration**

**Health factors.** One of the main challenges that face immigrants assimilating to the United States are the potential health risks. As one study showed, many immigrants are unaware of specific treatments, or the benefits and consequences of those treatments. As one study explained, many immigrant women were unaware of mammography and the benefits and risks associated with the procedure. Due to their lack of knowledge, immigrant women could be more at risk for breast cancer. Also, the same study also found that many doctors did not inform their patients to different medical treatments which limits patients' ability to make informed decisions regarding medical procedures (Nagler, Lueck, & Gray, 2017).

Research has showed that children living in ethnically dense neighborhoods, increases the chances of developing respiratory complications, such as asthma, bronchitis, and wheezing in sleep. However, for foreign-born adult immigrants, the chances of developing respiratory complications decreases (Grineski, Collins, & Young-An, 2016). Another health factor that increases for immigrants is obesity caused by lack of physical activity. In one study, it was shown that the more people that could speak and understand English, the safer they felt within their neighborhood. However, the less English spoken and understood within immigrant homes, the less safe they would feel and consequently, the less they would leave their homes. This lack of physical activity increased the chances for immigrants to become obese (Lu, Donglan, Meijgaard, MacLeod, & Fielding, 2015). In another study, one of the ways that helped to build stronger communities was the creation of a community garden. These gardens helped immigrants to socialize with others more and become part of their neighborhood and community. Another

benefit of these gardens was the increased vegetable intake and physical exercise (Hartwig & Mason, 2016).

**Psychological factors.** Some other challenges that immigrants face is related to psychological issues. As one study showed, there is a decrease in overall wellbeing for immigrants being forced to acculturate. The psychological wellbeing of immigrants can be increased if they are given proper support from those around. By decreasing the focus on assimilating into American culture, immigrants are given the opportunity to choose their own way fit into their community (Buckingham & Suarez-Pedraza, 2018). The mental health of immigrants is an area that is not focused on in many areas. Many times, depression, anxiety, and other mental health problems are underreported by immigrant. Many times, an immigrant's culture frowns upon mental health and families feel shame for reporting such issues. However, while mental health is underreported, these communities create a strong bond with each other and their culture (Roberts, Mann, & Montgomery, 2015).

**Community factors.** One of the ways that communities can help immigrants acculturate into the United States is by creating specific programs involving the whole community. One of these programs is the Immigrant Worker Disaster Resilience Workgroup in New York and New Jersey. This program was created to help immigrants be incorporated into the community and help build a positive connection (Cuervo, Leopold, & Baron, 2017). Other programs that help to connect immigrants with the larger community have shown to be extremely effective in helping immigrants acculturate more smoothly (Okazaki, Wong, & Kaplan, 2017). Another important aspect for immigrants assimilating into American neighborhoods is the perceptions people have of immigrants moving into more rural neighborhoods. One study created a scale for immigrants

moving into predominately white neighborhoods. This scale helps to see how well immigrants feel within these neighborhoods and their ability to assimilate smoothly (Flores et al., 2018).

### **Gaps in Literature**

Currently, there was enough literature available to answer my research question and plenty of resources available to support my findings. Another area of research that would help add a clearer understanding on this topic would be on immigrant communities. For example, as I had stated earlier, there is a large population of Arab refugees and immigrants living in Dearborn Michigan. Researching the benefits and consequences for people living in these ethnically dense communities can shed light on acculturation methods for members of these communities. Or if living in immigrant communities would lessen the need to acculturate to American society due to being surrounded by so many people of the same culture. It would also be interesting to compare the mental, physical, and emotional health of immigrants living within immigrant community to immigrants living in American neighborhoods.

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

One theory that can help understand difficulties that immigrants face is that of Eugene Hartley. His experiment focused on prejudice and if it was related to interactions with the population being discriminated against (Zastrow & Krist-Ashman, 2016). With a group of test subjects, Hartley gave a list of prejudice remarks about Jews and African Americans, as well as three non-existent people groups. He found that those who were prejudice against Jews and African Americans, were also prejudice to the non-existent groups as well. This theory is useful in understanding how American communities may react to immigrant populations that they have never met, and that prejudice is not necessarily caused by interactions with people.

Another theory that is useful to know is that of normal child development. From one year old to about 11 years old, children undergo tremendous growth in vocabulary and language skills (Zastrow & Krist-Ashman, 2016, pp. 79-85). Once this window passes, learning a new language is much more challenging. As immigrants move to the United States, learning English is a useful skill to have. With this theory, professionals can see how challenging it is for immigrants to learn English and work to create learning methods that can help the most.

### **Conclusion and Position**

What research has shown is that there are several different factors that affect immigrants' health while assimilating to the United States. Some of these factors include lack of physical activity (Lu, Donglan, Meijgaard, MacLeod & Fielding, 2015), lack of information regarding health care (Nagler, Lueck & Gray, 2017), or respiratory conditions (Grineski, Collins & Young-An, 2016).

There are also psychological conditions that immigrants face, such as stress from acculturating (Buckingham & Suarez-Pedraza, 2018) and underreporting of mental health challenges (Roberts, Mann & Montgomery, 2015). Researchers also discovered how important community is for immigrants with the use of community gardens (Hartwig & Mason, 2016), involving immigrants in community development (Okazaki, Wong & Kaplan, 2016) (Cuervo, Leopold & Baron, 2017), and how a neighborhoods' perspective of immigrants can affect immigrants' wellbeing (Flores et al., 2018).

The research supports my hypothesis of how immigrants face multiple problems in the United States. Since the evidence from my research aligns with my views there is no tension but helps to strengthen my position on the subject. My current position is that when immigrants enter the United States, there are several different factors that can make assimilating difficult. As

research has shown, due to language barriers, immigrants can face health challenges, medical personnel do not disclose different medical treatments for clients, and many people lack community support. As a future social worker, my goal is to create programs that can help immigrants' transitions into American life smoother and create strong bonds within their communities.

Some recommendations that I have for those in the helping profession would be based on the work of Lu, Donglan, Meijgaard, MacLeod, and Fielding, being able to speak and understand English helps people to feel safer in their communities (2015). With this information, social workers and other helping professionals would be able to offer English classes for those who do not speak English at all or very well. This would then help them assimilate more smoothly within their community and feel safer within their neighborhood.

As Nagler, Lueck, and Gray found in their study (2017), many immigrant women are unaware of certain medical treatment options available to them and the benefits or consequences of undergoing such procedures. As social workers, it is our ethical responsibility to educate and inform clients of all possible options and give them the pros and cons of those procedures.

Building community activities, such as community gardens, has shown to be an effective method for immigrants assimilating to the United States (Hartwig & Mason, 2016). Social workers and churches could work together to create more community programs for immigrants and help them get involved more with the community.

At the micro level, the most effective way to address these issues would be in individual counseling. Through one-on-one counseling, a social worker would be able to help with systems of depression, anxiety, or stress and develop positive coping skills. With individual counseling a



social worker would also be able to connect the client to resources such as language classes, more information regarding healthcare and support groups.

For the mezzo level, an effective method could be group counseling sessions or support groups to help other immigrants have a sense of community with other immigrants facing the same challenges and issues. Along with support groups, the facilitator could share different resources that the members would be able to utilize as a group. This could help build stronger connections within the group and help them to acculturate more smoothly.

At the very top, macro level, the government should create programs that are designed to help immigrants assimilate into the United States. For examples, programs aimed at teaching English and incorporating community-based activities to strengthen immigrant involvement in their neighborhoods. As Cuervo, Leopold, and Baron showed, training immigrants for disaster relief helped to create a stronger connection with the community and provided much needed support in times of disaster (2017).

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