

NORTHERN VIRGINIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

THE IMPACT OF AGE IN THE ACCULTURATION OF LATIN-
AMERICAN IMMIGRANTS TO THE US

A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

In recent years, both the challenges posed by globalization, and the conflicts emerging from the character of the US as an increasingly multicultural society have multiplied. Understanding immigrants, the ways in which they incorporate into the mainstream social tissue, and the way in which they interact with cultural stress and societal resistance is a key element in order to solve this puzzle. Through first person narratives and reflections, this study explores the experiences of Latin American born individuals who migrated to the US. Specifically, this research focuses on the impact of the age of the subjects at the time of immigration in the process of transitioning from their home culture to that of the host society. Through the eyes of six immigrants that represent the population under analysis, we gain access to the complexities and difficulties of their journey, their cultural transition and the varying degrees of acculturation resulting from their unique experiences. The phenomenological study of the data gathered in the course of the different interviews identifies the relevant variables that affect the acculturation process. This research also analyzes the available literature on Hispanic culture and traditions, immigration trends past and present, and the different theories on acculturation, in order to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background and Statement of the Problem

The US has always been defined as a country of opportunity, a “melting pot” where people from all origins and backgrounds can find a place to grow and develop their talents through hard work and perseverance. This label attracted masses of immigrants, from the waves of hungry Irish displaced by the Potato Blight, or Germans and Italians who couldn’t find a place in their budding nations in the nineteenth century, to the Jews, Polish and Russians fleeing the terrors of Nazism and Communism. In all these cases, the US welcomed these immigrants, and mostly in the bigger, more industrialized cities, they were able to find a place to work their way up the social ladder. They became Americanized, acquired the culture of their new home, and kept some of their home values and traditions. These success stories paved the way of newer waves of hopeful souls.

But maybe as an aftershock of WWII, or as a secondary-effect of the Marshall Plan, in the mid fifties the influx of European immigrants diminished, and different socio-cultural groups replaced them. These new groups originated in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East and Asia (US Census Bureau, 2013. Online). While very different among themselves, these new groups shared a common trait: they were perceived by the host community as being culturally “different” from them, and were not as accepted as their predecessors, the Europeans (Hungrinton, 2004).

The process by which these new waves of immigrants became part of the American social tissue was unique, and, in a way, extremely difficult. In order to Americanize, these people not only changed their language and their citizenship, they changed the laws that ruled them, the expectations on social adequacy, the dominant religious framework and, most importantly, their identity. As a general rule,

immigrant identity suffers two kinds of modifications: of Presentation and of Re-presentation. Either by will or chance, many immigrants change their names (who they are, the way they present themselves to others); the second modification involves the change in the way in which they are perceived by others (what they are, the role they have in the new context).

According to the American Census Bureau, in 2010 the immigrants in the US rounded 50 million people. That means that almost one of every seven Americans today is foreign-born. This figure does not include the numbers of second-generation immigrants (the children of those who migrated to the US), who also keep and share (to varying degrees) the home language and culture. These second or even third generation immigrants also share some of the problems faced by the first-generation immigrants. Finding out how these people transitioned from their original culture to the American Way, and what was left behind, is the target of this study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of Latin American immigrants integrating to the American mainstream culture, and to determine if the different patterns employed were affected by the age of immigration. Acculturation processes have been widely studied from a variety of perspectives, and multiple ethnic groups have been analyzed, but most of the studies are the result of the application of quantitative methods, and they lack the richness and subtleties of reflecting the actual experience of migration and acculturation. Considering that the trends in immigration are expected to remain constant, and that a significant part of the American population claims to have Hispanic origin (the projected Hispanic population -17% of the total in 2012- will reach 29.9% in 2060) it becomes relevant to identify the many ways in which they “Americanize”.

Major Research Question

Is there difference between the acculturation process of adults as compared to younger immigrants?

Sub Questions

1. Does the community of origin of an immigrant affect the likelihood of a successful acculturation?
2. Does educational level have an impact?
3. Does participating in community activities, attending religious services or having political affiliations help with acculturation?
4. Is it possible not to assimilate to the new culture?
5. Does occupation affect the adaptation process?

Hypothesis Statement

The age of the individual at the time of immigrating to the US affects the acculturation process, and its likelihood of success.

Nature of Study

The researcher conducted a qualitative study, with a Phenomenological approach. Subjects were divided into two groups according to age at the time of immigration. Each group discussed their experience, and how difficult it was for them to transition to the new cultural environment. The discussion was recorded, and the resulting data was analyzed. From the analysis of data, the information was synthesized, and major themes were identified and grouped.

Theoretical Framework

The process of immigration and the cultural and psychological changes that individuals undergo when transitioning cultural frameworks has been studied since the beginning of the 20th Century, when the impact of the massive immigration processes started in the late 19th Century was already evident. In 1918, Thomas and Zanecky published the work that would become the cornerstone of the field: "The Polish Peasant in Europe and America". There, they established three forms of acculturation (bohemian, philistine and creative), defined by whether the individuals adopted, rejected or combined the values of the host culture. Initially, there was consensus among the literature in the definition of a successful transition: the individual "rejected" the old values and "adopted" the new ones. This idea was challenged in the mid fifties, when "Assimilation in American Life", written by Milton Gordon, introduced the idea that the process of transitioning was not a simple one, and was not unidirectional: the host culture was changed by the newcomers too. In the late 1980's, fuelled by developments in the fields of linguistics and semiotics, new studies proposed new models, more complex and controversial. Gudykunst and Kim created the concept of "transcultural identity", which is influenced by French Deconstructivism and Darwinism: in order to successfully adjust to the new environment, the individual must go through a process of "de-culturization" (unlearn what was archetypical of the old culture), and "re-creation" (learn the ways of the new culture). Only by eliminating the old self would a new, more mature, and functionally fit person emerge. Any effort made towards keeping traits of the old order would result in social, psychological and functional maladjustment. Opposing to these views, and influenced by the Post-modernist theories of Francois Lyotard, Kramer created the DAD Theory (Dimensional Accrual and Dissociation Theory), where the stress is laid on the additive nature of the process: the individual adds layers of appropriate cultural meaning. Kramer does not assume an idea of progress or ideal end product (equivalent to the assimilation stage of the "intercultural person" of Gudykunst and Kim). Kramer complemented DAD Theory developing his observations that different

cultures have different models of communication: idolic, symbolic or signalic. There is not a hierarchy between these three models, and the use of one or another can be more effective depending on circumstances. According to this, conflict is the result of miss-matched communication styles. An interesting point raised by the DAD theory is that in linguistics and semiotics, identity depends on difference. Kramer takes this premise to an extreme, and concludes that, if a state of “perfect assimilation” into the new culture were achievable, the resulting monoculture would make identity impossible. As a result, the “end product” would be a sort of post-modern nihilist, who would find every value exactly equal, destroying the concept of value itself. In the Western World, (which is mostly signalic), conflict results from the clash between the mainstream signalic culture, and the idolic style natural of some immigrant groups. This would seem to support Huntington’s controversial claim of a “clash of civilizations”.

Considering both the principles of Kramer’s DAD theory and Gudykunst & Kim’s concept of an “intercultural person”, it can be concluded that a younger immigrant would be better suited to transition from an “old” culture to a “new” culture; either because they have less cultural baggage to get rid off (Gudykunst & Kim), or because the communication styles of the different cultures are naturalized in them, eliminating the risk of mismatched communication (Kramer).

Significance of the Study

“Between the years 2027 and 2038, international migration is projected to become the primary driver in US population growth for the first time in nearly two centuries” (US Census Bureau, 2013. Online). According to Thomas Messenbourg, Senior Advisor to the US Census Bureau, this will reflect *“the nation’s declining fertility rates, the aging of the baby boomer population, and the continued immigration”*. In December 2012, the Census Bureau projected a constant level of net international migration of 725,000 (year on year) for the period 2012-2060. In the same study, they projected that the

Hispanic population (17% of the total in 2012) will reach 29.9% in 2060. Considering that the trends in immigration will remain constant, and that a significant part of the American population claims to have Hispanic origin, it becomes relevant to identify the many ways in which they “Americanize”.

Definition of Terms

- **Immigrant:** a person who comes to a foreign country to take up permanent residence.
- **Culture:** the beliefs, customs, arts, etc. of a particular society, group, place or time.
- **Tradition:** the stories, beliefs, etc. that have been part of the culture of a group of people for a long time.
- **Acculturation:** a cultural modification of an individual, group or people by adapting to or borrowing traits from another culture. Also: a merging of cultures as a result of prolonged contact.

Merriam-Webster Dictionary, Online.

Assumptions, Limitations and Delimitations.

The study focuses on Latin American - born immigrants to the US.

This study takes place in communities in Northern Virginia and Maryland.

The sample may not represent the population adequately.

The use of the word “Latin-American” is intended to avoid the gray areas in the definition of the term “Hispanic” or “Latino”.

Chapter II

A REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

Not long ago, when asked about “immigration”, many Americans would picture a steaming transatlantic, the eager eyes of hardworking men, women and children, and the shores of Ellis Island. This romantic image would bring to mind some personal story (maybe that of a parent or grandparent); the story of that relative who left the hardships of Europe to conquer the Brave New World the United States promised to all those willing to take the risk and work hard. Under that idyllic paradigm, all the different factions converged and merged into one new class: the American. The American “melting pot” would turn the diverse traditions that flowed from the ships into one smooth, homogeneous, cultural construct. Without being as uneventful, the fact is that, until the mid 20th Century, the majority of the immigrants adhered to this pattern. Even if most immigrant communities were heavily localized in ethnic neighborhoods, parents encouraged their children to speak only in English, (Citrin & Lerman, 2007) trips to the “old country” were extremely rare, and the ancestral traditions were simplified and trimmed into a new “Americanized” version of food, music or celebrations that was only a distant relative of the original

But was the transitioning process so seamless? Actually, the real experience was not picture perfect (Branigin, 1998). Under this paradigm, group differences seem to have faded off into the social tissue, but the individuals who changed cultures underwent different processes, and every ethnic group faced different challenges. To make matters even more complicated, the receiving society changed and adapted as it absorbed the newcomers (Esses et al, 2015). The

host society would not be the same after receiving large numbers of immigrants. The United States today is a good example: a complex, multicultural society, where conflict and cultural competence seem to flourish (Buenker & Lorman, 2005)

One more layer of complexity in the analysis of this phenomenon lays in the fact that, even if it is the same host culture, not all ethnicities integrate to the same degree. Of significant relevance is the analysis of the ethnicities that have a proportionally larger participation in the immigrant population. Hispanics are today not only the largest minority already established in the US, but also the fastest growing one, due to both birth rate and immigration (US Census Bureau, 2010). According to Samuel Huntington (2004), Hispanics are the group that has shown more resistance to acculturation, keeping their ancestral culture almost intact, well into the second and even the third generation. The same point is made by Taylor et al (2006), this time without any negative connotation on their part. As therapists working closely with their Latino patients, they can see and identify the topics or themes that run deep through the community.

A Review of the Literature of the Term Acculturation:

In 1936, Redfield, Linton & Herskovits defined the term acculturation:

“Acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups ... under this definition, acculturation is to be distinguished from culture change, of which is but one aspect, and assimilation, which is at times a phase of acculturation” (as cited by C.D. Spielberger, 2004).

Acculturation is a two way phenomenon, that involves both the changes produced in the individuals or groups that migrate, and in the societies that receive them. Some societies will

be more receptive than others, and the social resistance will impact the individual strategies. As stressed by Berry (2006) *“the long-settled populations strive to maintain their societies, in the face of increasing cultural diversity in their midst”*.

In order to understand acculturation, it is important to understand that changes occur both at the group and at the individual level (Sam, 2006). The two main issues in acculturation, that affect both the individual and the host community, are the desire for cultural maintenance (each group wants to keep their culture “pure”), and the desire for cultural contact (each group is more or less attracted by novelty) (Berry, 1997). The interplay of these two forces will result in the four acculturation strategies (assimilation, integration, separation and marginalization) employed by the society as a whole, and the individual immigrant. Combined with the acculturation strategy, at the individual level immigrants can present an integration profile (combining the ethnic component and the new cultural component), an ethnic profile (favoring only the ancestral component), a national profile (completely abandoning the ancestral values, and embracing the host culture) or a diffuse profile (the individual is not comfortable with either one, and shifts). The local ecology is a key element when individuals (specially the younger immigrants) lean towards one profile or another: discrimination, isolation or the lack or abundance of cultural diversity can play a major role (Berry et al, 2010). The personal outcome of the acculturation process may result in the acquisition of the new social skills, in the individual learning to cope with the stressors of not being culturally adept, or in the extreme, succumbing to the stressors and developing a psychopathology (Berry, 1997). The factors influencing the decision to migrate and the relations and cultural distance between the immigrant and the host society also have an impact in the acculturation process (Esses et al, 2015).

A Review on the Literature of the History of Acculturation

The relationship between people and their home culture has been a center of concern for generations. In Ancient Greece, the worst possible punishment for a crime was exile, and even death was preferred to it. In Plato's *Crito*, Socrates drank the poison after being found guilty of impiety, rather than leave Athens forever. The Roma Empire was as multicultural as any modern nation, but Roman citizens and foreigners had very different rights and duties, and becoming a citizen was a prized benefit for non Romans.

Nationality, cultural identity and sense of belonging are deeply ingrained in all of us, but only in the late 1800's, with the massive immigrations to populate the US, Australia and South America, the phenomenon of cultural diversity and all its connected problems, became evident.

The transition experienced by immigrants has been studied from multiple approaches. The first modern model, (Thomas and Zanecky, 1918) established three forms of acculturation (bohemian, philistine and creative) depending on whether the individual who immigrated adopted, rejected or combined the ancestral and the new values.

After the Great War, the focus of research was placed in solving the issue of "Americanizing" the immigration originated in the countries of eastern and southern Europe. The two positions were those of the Assimilationists, who considered that the ideal immigrant completely changed cultures, and the Cultural Pluralists, who compared the society resulting from immigration to a symphony. In a symphony, each instrument (ethnic group) has its own voice, but all play together harmoniously, and the resulting effect is more powerful and beautiful than the sound of the individual voice (Frederikson, 1999).

Different models have tried to explain the patterns evidenced by the research, varying mostly in the way individuals reject or adhere to the new cultural values. They are divided into two main trends: unidimensional (they measure the abandonment of the old culture versus the adoption of the new culture), and multidimensional (they measure the maintenance of the old culture and at the same time the acquisition of the new culture) (Celenk & Van de Vijver, 2011). The four basic acculturation models (Berry, 2006), range from assimilation (total acceptance of the host culture), to marginalization (rejection of both the host and the original culture). According to this, assimilation occurs when individuals abandon their original culture and replace it for the new one. Separation is the strategy employed for those individuals who keep a distance between themselves and the mainstream culture, in order to preserve their native cultural values. The integration strategy seems to be a win-win situation: the individual does not abandon the ancestral values, and at the same time freely interacts with the new cultural patterns. Finally, some individuals opt for the marginalization strategy: they reject both their own culture, and the culture of the new environment (Marin et al, 2008). It is to be noted that the choice of strategy lays not only on the individual transitioning cultures: the host community, and how willing it is to embrace diversity, will play a significant role in defining the final situation (Davis & Engel, 2011).

A review of the Literature on Hispanic Culture and Hispanic Immigration to the US

Hispanics are the fastest growing minority group in the US. The Hispanic population included 45.5 million (15.1 %) of the estimated US population (US Census Bureau, 2008). *“They come from more than 20 countries, sharing one common language. The three largest Hispanic groups in the US are: Mexican, Puerto Rican and Cuban”* (Davis & Engel, 2011). Historically, these groups were regionally concentrated in New York, Florida and the states of the West and

South West, but today they are a significant presence in every state. Hispanics tend to retain the use of their mother language, and to adhere to their ancestral traditions. They are also more likely to marry within their ethnicity (US Census Bureau 2010), and to maintain close ties with their extended family in the US or abroad.

A Review of the Literature of the Research Design

This study used a qualitative research design using a phenomenology approach. This decision was based on the analysis of the different methods. After considering the possibilities given by quantitative models, the advantages of a qualitative approach, with a focus on the actual individual experience were evident.

General research studies on acculturation and specifically, the acculturation of Hispanics to the American culture have been conducted using quantitative and qualitative methods. Davis and Engel (2011) have worked on measuring the perception of race and ethnicity. Of particular relevance to this research are those studies aimed at defining scales to measure the degree of acculturation of Hispanics as a class, and the three Hispanic groups that have the most significant presence in the US (Mexicans, Puerto Ricans and Cubans). Despite belonging to the same cultural universe, that of the Hispanics, the population in each group shows distinctive acculturation strategies. A broad-range, quantitative approach was taken by Tropp et al (1999), in their study "Acculturation between Anglo/American and Latino/Hispanic". In the same line, Marin et al (1987) developed a specific acculturation scale for Hispanics that measures both the attachment to the ancestral values and the adherence to the new culture. Quantitative studies interview sizable samples and use surveys and statistical analysis to define the boundaries of each acculturation level.

Qualitative studies focus on smaller samples, and try to define values for the populations by inference. Among the relevant qualitative research, the work of Gloria Arfelis (1998) focuses on the effects of acculturation on a particular population, that of college-educated Latin American women. Esses et al (2015) study the factors that affect acculturation in general. Berry et al (2010) focus on the problems of acculturation, identity, adaptation and the specific challenges that transitioning cultures impose on youth.

Finally, Berry in many of his works, (1997, 2005, 2010), and Celenk and Van de Vijer (2011) studied acculturation from a holistic perspective, not focusing on a specific ethnic group, and drawing conclusions that apply to the whole population covered by the definition of immigrant.

This researcher based this paper research design and methodology on Greenwald (2004), Hycner (1999) and Celenk et al (2011).

In an article published in the International Journal of Qualitative Methods, Greenwald describes the not only each of the steps that a phenomenological research has to cover, but most importantly, the philosophy behind phenomenology:

“to arrive at certainty, anything outside immediate experience must be ignored, and in this way the external world is reduced to the contents of personal experience. [...] The aim of the researcher is to describe, as accurately as possible, the phenomenon, refraining from any pre-given framework, but remaining true to the facts” (Greenwald, 2004).

In order to properly process the information provided by the subjects in the course of the interviews according to phenomenological standards, this researcher resourced to the Five Steps Explicitation Process (Hycner, 1999).

The main lines in the definition of key acculturation themes (acculturation conditions, acculturation orientations, dimensionality, domain-specificity and acculturation outcomes), as well as the scale descriptors, were taken from the comprehensive work of Celenk and Van de Vijver (2011).

Summary

The previous review of the literature highlighted the main trends and avenues explored by researchers in the field. Even though there is a considerable amount of literature, and the field has justly attracted a lot of attention in the last years, the fact remains that most researchers assess acculturation outcomes (mostly behavioral adjustments), and not psychological outcomes.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this research is to analyze the impact of a particular factor (the age of an individual at the time of immigration) in the overall acculturation process. The aim of the researcher is to describe, as fully as possible, the phenomenon of immigrating from Latin American countries to the US, and how the cultural transition process is affected by the age at which such process is started. Other factors, such as individual characteristics, personal expectations, characteristics of the society of origin, if immigration was the result of a personal choice or imposed by external circumstances, the perception of self before and after immigrating also impact the transitioning process.

Overview of Research Design and Rationale

The first step in the research design was identifying and defining the problem to be addressed. In this case, the impact of the age of the individuals at the time of their immigration to the US, in the acculturation process of Latin Americans. Even if acculturation processes have been widely studied and multiple ethnic groups have been analyzed, most of the studies are the result of the application of quantitative methods. They do not focus on the actual experience of migration and acculturation. For this reason, this researcher chose a qualitative research model. In this case, the application of a Phenomenological approach is the result of an epistemological position: data pertinent to the topic are contained within the perspectives of people who immigrated to the US from Latin American countries. Because of this, data collection will be possible only by engaging directly with them.

The second step in the process was locating the participants. The researcher used Purposive Sampling to select the informants: those individuals who have had the experience, and who fitted in the

pre-defined characteristics (Latin American-born, with at least five years of residency in the US). In order to expand the sample, Snowball Sampling was also employed: the informants recommended other subjects to be interviewed. The sample included 6 individuals. Three of them immigrated at a younger age, and three immigrated as adults.

To ensure the research complied with all ethical considerations, a written informed consent form for obtaining informed consent was designed to inform about the nature of the study and gain the research subjects' consent before being interviewed.

Data was gathered in the course of the interviews. Within phenomenology, the researcher must allow data to emerge, so there is not a structured questionnaire. The goal of the interview is that the informants describe the lived experience. It is crucial in this type of research that the interviewers suppress their own presuppositions and feelings. The open ended prompt that started the interviews was:

Tell me about your experience of moving to the US.

The reason you did it was ...

The researcher used semi-unstructured, in-depth phenomenological interviews, directed at the participants' feelings, ideas, emotions and beliefs. Each interview was different, because each informant had a different experience to share.

The data capturing process consisted of a recording of the interview, notes taken during the interview and notes made while the recording is analyzed.

Finally, the Explicitation of the Data (the phenomenological equivalent of data analysis) was based on Hycner's (1999) explicitation process.

Sampling Design

The study uses a purposive sampling. The first step in the sampling design was identifying the informants that would participate in the research. Informants would be individuals born in Latin American countries, who have lived in the US for at least five years. The reason for the five year limit is because many authors in the field make a difference between the experiences of migrants (transitory, short time residents) and immigrants (those foreigners who have settled in the country for a significant amount of time).

The participants are six individuals, five females and one male, from the Latin American immigrant community in the area of Northern Virginia and Maryland. Their ages range from 22 to 55 years old. One of them is a housewife, five of them work full time and one is a part-time student. They were born in Argentina, Peru, Venezuela, Colombia, El Salvador and Bolivia. The aim of this particular sampling design was to have a sample as diverse and as representative of the actual phenomenon as possible.

Demographic Table

Participant #	Age	Age at immigrat.	# of years in the US	Country of origin	Occupation / employment	Education
1	48	13	35	El Salvador	self- employed	Some school
2	22	14	6	Argentina	employed	Bachelors
3	55	12	43	Peru	employed	Masters
4	54	24	30	Venezuela	employed	Masters
5	43	26	17	Bolivia	housewife	Some college
6	41	33	8	Colombia	employed	Masters

Data Collection Procedures

A group of Latin American-born immigrants to the US were invited to participate in this study and informed of the particulars of the project. The ones who agreed to participate were given a consent form, and they signed it. The informants were interviewed in a house in Northern Virginia. After signing the consent form, participants completed a pre-screening survey that included demographics. If the answers to the screening questionnaire were satisfactory, they were given a self-reporting questionnaire on their level of acculturation. After that, they were divided into two groups according to their age at the time of immigration. Each group was interviewed separately.

The researcher conducted unstructured, in-depth phenomenological interviews. The interviews were recorded. During the interview the researcher also used Memoing (descriptive and reflective notes). Interviews took between 90 and 120 minutes, depending on the interviewees. After the interview was over, the researcher transcribed the interview, organized the field notes and identified clusters of meaning in the discourse. Once the clusters of meaning were identified, the researcher eliminated the redundant units of meaning, made notes of the ones that were repeated the most among the volunteers, and organized the units of meaning around themes. The interviews were summarized and the significant topics were identified.

Data Instrumentation

The subjects received an informed consent form, a screening questionnaire that includes demographics, and a self reporting questionnaire on level of acculturation. The informed consent assured the anonymity of the responses, and the ethical standards that a research study should maintain. The purpose of the screening test was to determine that all the participants in the sample were indeed part of the population under study. Finally, the self-reported level of acculturation was used to contrast and validate the findings of the interviews. The report on level of acculturation is

loosely based on the Unidimensional Short Acculturation Scale for Hispanics developed by Marin, Sabogal, Marin, Otero-Sabogal & Perez-Stable in 1987.

Field Testing

The questionnaires were tested on a group of people who met the requirements of the sample. They were streamlined to remove ambiguity and redundancy.

Data Analysis Plan and Procedures

Data was analyzed according to Hycner's 5-Steps Explicitation Process. In phenomenological studies, the preferred term is explicitation of the data, because the word "analysis" has a connotation of "breaking into smaller units" that is contrary to the holistic nature of the phenomenon. According to Hycner (1999), the explicitation process consists of investigating the constituents of the phenomenon, while keeping the context of the whole. The researcher, by finding the essential features and relationships, transforms data through interpretation.

1. Bracketing and Phenomenological Reduction

The researcher's ideas cannot enter the participant's world. No position is taken for or against.

The researcher listens to the recording to get familiarized with the words, expressions and intonation of the informant. Develops a holistic perception, the here and now the individual's personal experience.

(Gestalt)

2. Delineating Units of Meaning

The researcher extracts or isolates the statements that depicts the recorded phenomenon (young-age or older-age immigration); eliminates the redundant units and pays attention to repetitions and non-verbal cues.

3. Clustering of Units of Meaning to Form Themes

Researcher lists non-redundant units of meaning, examines list and elicits the essential meaning within a holistic context. Clusters of themes are created, by grouping units of meaning together. The final step is to identify significant topics, known as units of significance.

4. Summarize the Interview

The researcher summarizes the interview, and points out relevant quotations.

5. Composite Summary

Detects general and unique themes for all the interviews. Researcher looks for themes common to all, as well as individual variations.

Researcher concludes the explication by writing a composite summary, which reflects the context from where the themes emerged.

Limitations of the Research Design

The sample is not big enough to be statistically significant, so findings cannot be generalized to the whole population. Time restrictions imposed limitations on data collection and analysis. The results may or may not be representative of the population. The consequence of this is that no recommendations or inferences can be made from the results. Further studies should be performed.

Internal and External Validity

Internal and external validity are impacted by the limitations of the study, but the general guidelines from the research proposal are worth pursuing.

Expected Findings

The hypothesis states that there is a difference due to the age at the moment of immigration in the acculturation process of Latin American immigrants to the US. The underlying idea is that the younger immigrants have an easier transition from their native culture to the culture of the US, making their acculturation process swifter and less traumatic.

Ethical Considerations

This study does not pose any risk to the participants. The ethic standards are preserved and the wellbeing of the participants is of the utmost relevance. Participants are informed of the nature, purpose and scope of the research study, their contribution is kept confidential, all the recordings are destroyed after being analyzed to assure their privacy and they can decide to stop participating at any given time. If they so decide, the information gathered about them is discarded.

Chapter IV

Research Findings and Discussion

The aim of this researcher was to determine if the experience of acculturation of Latin-American born immigrants was in any way different (easier or harder), depending on the subject's age at the time of immigration to the US. For that purpose, two groups were contrasted: subjects in group 1 had immigrated to the US in their teens; subjects in group 2 had immigrated to the US as adults.

The subjects discussed their respective immigration experiences, and highlighted the situations that had a stronger impact on them. They all coincided in how hard it was to transition from their home culture to that of the US, and most of them mentioned what high an emotional price they paid to be in the US. Participants in both groups stressed almost exactly the same topics. Even if the subjects that immigrated at a young age said that they did not have the stress of dealing with the logistics of the transition, because that part of the process was handled by their parents, they mentioned the same themes as their older counterparts.

Narratives

About the General Experience of Immigration:

Group 1 – Teenagers at the time of immigration

Participant # 1

"At first I didn't know where I was. I mean, I knew I was in the States, but I didn't know anything else. I couldn't speak the language then. I was very afraid. We had to leave our village and my family did all the preparations. We escaped, you know? It was a secret. My cousins came with me, but we got separated. I only met my family months after I got to the US. People were both kind and bad to us. Some

helped, but most of them were bad. I worked a lot. I cleaned houses with a woman from my village, and made money to help. My mom stayed in El Salvador, or Mexico, I don't know, waiting to cross, but she never did it. She died in El Salvador a few years ago. I'm very happy I saw her before she died. I was able to travel back once I was legal, but I don't want to go back forever. The "gringos" are difficult to understand. They tell you: "This is America, speak English", and when you try they say you are a dirty Latino with a bad accent. They are not religious, they say nice, but then they don't care about you, because you are "brown". I mostly stay with my own people. I know them, and I understand what they do. I work for the "gringos", but I don't have any "gringo" friends. I always tell my children not to trust them. My children make me proud. They are good children. They work hard. My daughter went to George Mason, and she works in DC. She doesn't clean houses. "

Participant # 2

"Moving Stateside was difficult on all accounts, but at least the logistics weren't handled by me. My mom got a job here, and it was supposed to be for just one year. But we stayed. I wasn't happy, because I liked my life in back home. Even if I understood English, the insider insight so valuable to be socially successful in an American high school escaped me entirely. It wasn't until my sophomore year of college that I felt truly comfortable in the States. I never turned to the Latino community as a way to integrate to the "edges" of the social structure. Instead, I dived headfirst into the median of the student body, which eventually led me to join a top tier sorority in my school. In retrospect, it was a brilliant strategy, as it forced me to adapt to the very core, while understanding who I was because of where I was coming from."

Participant # 3

“We moved to the States when I was 12. It was part of my parents’ plan for our education. They wanted us to be bilingual and bicultural, so my brothers and I went to the American School in Lima. In fact, when we came to Maryland life wasn’t so different: in Lima we played “trick or treat” with our school friends, and my school celebrated the 4th of July. One thing I noticed was very different when we moved to the US was that we didn’t have maids, and we had to do the chores at home. My father worked for the IDB, and travelled a lot, so we didn’t see him much. My mom was at home, and soon after we moved here, we had baby twin brothers. At the time, political things were difficult in Peru, so my parents decided to stay. I became an American citizen. It wasn’t really a problem for me. I think that I always felt comfortable here. Family members frequently came to visit, and we did go to Peru to visit my grandparents. I see myself as Peruvian-American, but the US has always been my country. I never dated Hispanic men, because they don’t respect a woman’s freedom. My husband is American. He doesn’t speak Spanish, we speak English between us. My children don’t speak Spanish, but they can understand it.”

Analysis and Summary of Themes

All participants in this group coincide on their lack of personal involvement in the process of moving to the US. The move was decided by their parents, and reflected the adults’ needs and priorities. Two of the subjects feel that they have adapted well to the life in the US, while the other subject still sees herself as an outsider. The two subjects that feel comfortable in the mainstream culture and see themselves as part of the American world consume media mostly in English, while the other subjects prefers ethnic music, TV and social media. Despite their different experiences, they all three coincide on the importance of being culturally competent in order to be comfortable in the new society.

Group 2 – Adults at the time of immigration**Participant # 4**

“As soon as I graduated in Caracas, I applied for a job in the airlines business. The company needed someone to relocate to Miami, and I think it was cheaper for them to pay the expenses of a single woman over someone with a family, so they hired me. Transitioning was easy because the company handled all the logistics: they gave me an apartment and a car, and a lot of benefits. The social life in Miami is very Latino, and working for an airline I was able to travel home frequently, so I didn’t feel any kind of culture-shock. I made very good money, and my job was exiting. I didn’t think I would stay at the time, but then I met the guy I eventually married. After that, my parents moved to the States because I didn’t have the job anymore, and travelling back to Venezuela wasn’t easy. I was pregnant with twins, and my mom wanted to help. My (ex) husband is not Hispanic and doesn’t speak Spanish, so it was always English with him. I always talked to my daughters in Spanish, and my mom did the same. They learned their prayers in Spanish before learning them in English. I haven’t been to Venezuela in a very long time because it is politically dangerous. I’m very proud of being American, but I’m also very proud of being Latino.”

Participant # 5

“When I came to the US, I thought it would be only for a time. My husband’s work went well, and then we stayed. I think we were lucky because it is very difficult to come here legally. I don’t work. I stay at home and take care of my men: my husband and my son. I’ve lived here for a long time, but still have problems with the language. I still have my accent, and people sometimes mention it. Depending on how that happens, it can make me feel uncomfortable or not. I miss my family, and the food, and my friends, but then I go to Bolivia and I miss the life here. One thing that made me very happy is that I was the first

to become American in my family, so it was me, and not my husband, the one to make my son American. My husband says he is jealous of it. In church and in my neighborhood most of the people are Hispanics. We have a lot of friends. I don't have white American friends, but is not because I don't like them. Gringos are just different. What I don't like about them is that the gringos always make comments on the Latinas being hot, and think it is fine for them to be calling you "mamacita" when it's not. I think it is very disrespectful."

Participant # 6

"I first came to Virginia in 2006, with an exchange visa. I came as a professional educator, and I expected to be treated as such. The company that hired me made us go through a lot of preparations before saying we were ready to come. I thought I was ready, and that the culture shock would be minimal. But once I got here, I found out that there is a lot of discrimination against Latinos, even if you speak good English and try to blend in. I was lucky because my job is in Sterling, and the area is very multicultural. When I came, my coworkers were ok, and they tried to help me settle, but the people on the stores make nasty comments about Latinos in general. And then they say "is not about you, but ...", so there's a lot of racism, but they pretend it is a joke. I have some white friends among my coworkers, but most of my real friends are Latinos. My partner is Hispanic too. We share a lot of things, like the food, and the music we like. I don't think I could have been involved with someone who doesn't share my language and my traditions. I like to speak in Spanish at home, and to celebrate all the Hispanic holidays. We do some Halloween and stuff like that, but it's not something I feel real. Even if I have my green card, and I plan to become a citizen, I will always be a proud Colombian."

Analysis and Summary of Themes

Like participants in Group 1, the subjects in Group 2 are also acutely aware of cultural differences. Unlike the younger immigrants, they seem to show a deeper connection to their home culture. They expressly mention food, music and the celebration of traditional holidays. The three subjects in this group expressed ethnic pride, but only two of them also expressed their pride of being American. The three subjects in this group used media mostly in Spanish, contrasted to only one subject in Group 1.

On discrimination and assimilation:

Subjects in both groups mentioned that they had faced racial discrimination, and said that discrimination was an element that would make them stay within their own class. Participants # 1 and # 6 were equally emphatic, and each belonged to a different age group. Participant # 6 said:

“I think that there is no way you can be prepared to face the amount of derogatory comments you are going to receive just for being from Latin America. People simply assume you are illiterate, illegal and live on social security.”

Participant #1 added:

“Americans don’t care about you, because you are “brown”. I mostly stay with my own people. I know them, and I understand what they do. I work for the “gringos”, but I don’t have any “gringo” friends.”

Looks and accent or difficulty speaking English were the perceived triggers of discrimination. Participant # 2 felt she had been successful socially in a mostly American environment but said:

“It is also noteworthy it’s easier being an exotic foreigner with good looks and a barely noticeable accent, than a flag-waving Latino with no intention to forego their cultural standards and social patterns in order to fit in.”

Analysis and Summary of Themes

In this case, participants shared their experiences and coincided on the elements that triggered the discriminatory event (physical stereotype and lower language proficiency / accent). Only two subjects said they had not personally experienced discrimination, but had witnessed discrimination against other Latin American nationals. It is important to note that these were the same two subjects who claimed they felt part of the American culture, and who got the highest scores in the acculturation scale. Another element that must have played a part in their inexperience of discrimination is that neither of them physically fits into the stereotype of “Hispanic”, and that both of them have flawless English with only the slightest undetectable accent.

On language:

Language was identified as the single most relevant variable in being socially accepted. All the participants mentioned linguistic ability as “the” barrier to social and functional adequacy. A strong accent and limited English proficiency were seen as extremely disadvantageous. As one participant states:

“You need to have good English here. It’s the only way to become part of the society and be happy in this country.” Participant # 6

Being able to communicate in English is not enough:

“They tell you: “This is America, speak English”, and when you try they say you are a dirty Latino with a bad accent.” Participant # 1

Analysis and Summary of Themes

Only two out of the six subjects (participants who scored the highest in the acculturation scale) used mostly English during the interview. One individual switched from English to Spanish with the same degree of comfort, and she also scored high in the acculturation test. The other three subjects favored Spanish during the interview (and in their personal lives), and their acculturation tests showed the lowest scores.

On education:

Education in general was perceived by both groups as crucial. Subjects in both groups expressed that education was the only way for Latinos to overcome social and economic disadvantages. Subject # 1 contrasts her life with limited education to her daughter’s, who went to school:

“My daughter went to George Mason, and she works in DC. She doesn’t clean houses. ”

Three of the subjects were involved in different community programs that educated Latin American children and their families. They mentioned they could have more empathy than a non-Hispanic, and there were fewer defensive barriers on the part of the less favored immigrants:

“I think we have to do something to make their lives better. Children go to school and learn, but even if they make good grades, there are parents out there who cannot read the report card their kids take home.” participant # 4

Analysis and Summary of Themes

All subjects valued education as a tool to improve their lives, and they were actively involved in different ways with education. They volunteered, because they wanted to “give back”, acted as role models, were professional educators, or pushed their children through the maze of the American education system. This is not surprising, considering that four out of six subjects were college graduates, three had post graduate studies, and the two subjects who did not have a college degree tried to advance their children’s educational level beyond theirs. It needs to be noted that the educational level of the sample does not represent the educational level of the Latin American population in the US, according to the US Census 2010.

On ancestral traditions:

There was unanimous agreement among the subjects on the importance they gave to their ancestral culture and traditions. Subjects either referred to themselves as Latino/Hispanic, or as their national origin (Peruvian, Colombian, Argentinean, etc.). They also tried to transmit the ancestral values to the younger generations:

“For me, going back wasn’t important. I belonged with my family, and they were here. For us, family is the most important thing. Family and the Catholic values. And that’s what I taught my children.” Participant # 3

“My daughters spoke Spanish from day one. When they learned their prayers, it was first in Spanish and then in English. As soon as they could read, I bought them a beautiful Reyna Valera, so we could read the Bible together with my mother, in Spanish.” Participant # 4

An interesting aspect of the value placed on the home culture is that this was very nationalistic. It was not clearly stated, but subtly implied, that they valued their national culture over the culture of the other Latin American countries.

"I was never part of an ESL class. When I came here, I was more advanced than the other students in my grade, so the nuns asked me to help a group of Spanish speaking students. I was their "teacher" in the way things were done in America. Those children came from countries with not ideal education. Not like my country or yours." Participant # 3

Analysis and Summary of Themes

Even if they all prize their home culture, there are some divergent themes. Some of the subjects were adamant in wanting their children to speak Spanish. Other subjects considered that the "traditional cultural values" could be transmitted to the younger generations in a language other than Spanish. Half of the sample stated that they would not consider having a partner outside their ethnic group, because they would not be sharing the same culture and values. The other half of the sample had been or was romantically involved with a person outside their ethnic group. Actually, one subject specifically stated that she would NOT consider a partner from a Latin American country because of cultural differences, mostly in gender equality. The three subjects who did have American partners were the three that had the highest scores in the acculturation scale.

On social interaction (employment, affiliations and social life)

Subjects in both groups emphasized the importance of the social context in the acculturation process. Going to church, school, participating in community activities and having jobs were seen as opportunities to learn about the culture of the host society and "Americanize". Church and community

activities were seen as “risk-free” environments, whereas school, employment or the professional life were not necessarily immigrant-friendly.

“Religion is very important to me. I love going to church, and sharing my faith with others. I think that participating in community outreach programs is my duty. I have to be a role model to others, so they see that it can be done. It’s a way to give back.” Participant # 4

“I don’t go out to work, but I meet people in church and at the gym. Most of our friends and neighbors go too. We sing, we laugh, we joke. We share the things we’ve learned about living in America. I feel accepted there.” Participant # 5

“Even though I work in Sterling, and the area is very multicultural, I’ve found problems. Initially, some of my coworkers were reluctant to consider me as highly qualified as them, just because I was from Colombia and I speak English with an accent. It took some time till we got to the point where I understand what they mean, and they understand what I say. And they respect me professionally.”
Participant # 6

“The kids at school would ask: “do you have cars in your country?” or “do lamas walk around?”. Now I know they were just curious, but at the time I felt offended.” Participant # 3

Analysis and Summary of Themes

Social interaction (whether it be employment, study, attending religious services or participating in community activities), was perceived by the subjects as a source of opportunities to grow their cultural competence. They were also seen as an opportunity for pain and social humiliation. They found some activities less risky (attending religious services was a stress-free activity), while other activities were seen as loaded with cultural stress (employment and education). While subjects were willing to participate in all of them, they had deep fears of being discriminated against. And discrimination led to

frustration, embarrassment and isolation. In the face of rejection, they turned to their own ethnicity for shelter, and stunted their acculturation process. Those fears were expressed more clearly at the two ends of the education level: in general, the more competitive the situation is, the more likely it is that an immigrant (any immigrant) will be resisted, and the more that immigrant will have to prove themselves. Immigrants in sought-after positions (jobs in a stagnant economy, academic recognition, scholarships, awards or promotions) are generally perceived as taking an American's place at school or the workforce.

Chapter V

CONCLUSIONS

Gaps in Understanding and Research

One of the most important elements to consider here is that neither the subjects nor the researcher speak English as their native language. The subjects narrated their experiences in a mixture of English and Spanish, and they moved from one language to the other as it seemed to better suit the emotions they were trying to express. Even if this researcher's native language is Spanish, the different Spanish dialects employed by the subjects may have hindered understanding. When English was used, it was sometimes hard to tell if the choice of words was because they thought that word was the most appropriate to describe the experience, or just the only word they could come up with at the time. The work of translating the quotations was also very challenging, as per phenomenological principles, the voice of the researcher should not be heard. How was it possible not to fall into the old adage of "traduttore, traditore", and mix the researcher's own emotions when choosing the English words that translated the Spanish expressions? Finally, since the researcher herself does fall under the category studied in this paper, the crucial step of "bracketing" during data collection and data explication added an extra layer of difficulty to an already complex task.

Summary of Key Findings

The hypothesis of this research study states that the age of the individual at the time of immigrating to the US affects the acculturation process, and its likelihood of success. The hypothesis implied that those individuals who transition cultures at a younger age acculturate more easily and to a fuller degree. However, the findings of this study do not support the hypothesis. Subjects showed varying degrees of acculturation and expressed different levels of personal satisfaction across the

sample, but there was not a strong correlation between those differences and their age at immigration. The two factors that did emerge as very significant in acculturation were the immigrant's command of the English language (the higher, the better) and how prepared was the individual at the time of immigrating. Surprisingly, the importance of preparedness (or lack of) was mentioned not only by the subjects who immigrated to the US in their adulthood and had to deal with the legal and practical sides of the process, but also by those individuals who were too young to worry about the logistics of the immigration process itself. Another theme that emerged as having a significant impact on acculturation was the perceived discrimination. Unrelated to age at immigration, those subjects who mentioned the higher incidence of perceived discrimination were less likely to try and integrate to the mainstream culture.

Implications and Recommendations for Further Study

That of immigrant acculturation is a very wide field. Researchers have targeted different ethnic groups, genders and ages, and Hispanics or Latinos have been generously represented in both quantitative and qualitative studies. Despite the limited size of the sample, and the scientific impossibility of extending the findings to the general population, this particular study has unveiled three important variables that affect the acculturation process. One is a social variable, and two are individual variables. The social variable is that of the perceived discrimination. When facing discrimination repeatedly, the subjects in the sample tended to feel rejected by the host society, and turn towards their own ethnic group for acceptance. As a consequence, their acculturation process suffered. The two individual variables that affected the acculturation process were language proficiency and preparedness. The higher these two variables scored, the easier the acculturation process was experienced. The importance of uncovering these three variables lays in the development of actions towards integrating immigrants to the mainstream society. For further research, stress should be put on finding ways to

develop programs destined to improve the immigrants' language skills, and a better understanding of the local culture. Prospective immigrants should be made aware of the costs and gains involved in moving to a different culture. Language proficiency and preparedness are factors that can be determined and improved by the immigrants themselves. If institutions find a way of making immigrants more aware of their relevance, their journey at the individual level would be less troublesome. The last variable (discrimination) is a social variable, and thus much more difficult to alter. The only way seems to be a sustained effort on educating the population, both from the private and the public spheres. As a final note, even if these findings relate to a very specific population (Latin American immigrants to the US), it is not unreasonable to assume that they may very well mirror those of other immigrant groups, so further developments in the field would benefit a considerable number of future Americans.

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Appendix

Informed Consent

Data Collection Instruments

PSY 211 – RESEARCH METHODOLOGY FOR THE BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES

The Impact of Age in the Acculturation of Latin American Immigrants to the US

Dear Participant,

You will be participating in a research study.

The purpose of this research study is to analyze the experience of immigrating from Latin American countries to the US.

Your participation will consist of an interview, where you will narrate your experience of moving from your native country in Latin America. The interview will be recorded. Before the interview, you will respond to a short series of questions about you.

Your participation is entirely voluntary.

You can stop participating at any time, no questions asked. If you decide to stop participating, any information you may have given up to that point will be discarded. Recordings will be destroyed.

The responses are completely anonymous.

To protect your privacy, all recordings will be destroyed after data is obtained.

The information you provide will not be shared with anyone.

Your wellbeing is of the utmost importance. Participation in this research entails no risks, but if at any time you feel uncomfortable, you may choose to terminate the interview.

The benefits of this research study will mainly impact the Latin American community, since the findings will permit a better understanding of the idiosyncratic characteristics of a growing phenomenon.

Date

Initial

(please, don't write your full name)

PSY 211 – RESEARCH METHODOLOGY FOR THE BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES**The Impact of Age in the Acculturation of Latin American Immigrants to the US****Pre-screening Survey**

These questions determine the volunteer's eligibility to participate in the research and provide general demographic information.

Instructions:

Please respond to the following questionnaire

- 1. What is your age?**
- 2. What was your age at the time of immigration?**
- 3. How many years have you lived in the US?**
- 4. What is your country of origin?**
- 5. Gender:**
- 6. What is your educational level?**
- 7. What was your educational level at the time of immigration to the US?**
- 8. Do you work?**
- 9. Do you study?**

Thank you!

PSY 211 – RESEARCH METHODOLOGY FOR THE BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES**The Impact of Age in the Acculturation of Latin American Immigrants to the US****ACCULTURATION SCALE**

These questions determine the volunteers' attachment to their original culture and to the American culture

Instructions:

Please circle the option that best represents you:

	1	2	3
The people I feel most comfortable with are:	Original Culture	Both equally	American culture
My closest friends are:	Original Culture	Both equally	American culture
People in my neighborhood are:	Original Culture	Both equally	American culture
The people that share my values the most are:	Original Culture	Both equally	American culture
I know what is acceptable in most situations in:	Original Culture	Both equally	American culture
I'm proud to be part of:	Original culture	Both equally	American culture
I feel most comfortable speaking:	Spanish	Both equally	English
I talk to my children in:	Spanish	Both equally	English
I talk to my parents in:	Spanish	Both equally	English
I prefer to listen to music in:	Spanish	Both equally	English
I celebrate:	Spanish holidays	Both equally	English holidays
I prefer watching TV in:	Spanish	Both equally	English
I prefer to read in:	Spanish	Both equally	English
My Facebook posts are in:	Spanish	Both equally	English
I prefer to attend religious services in:	Spanish	Both equally	English

Thank you!