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# Being undocumented in the United States: the impact on Mexican immigrants' mental health

Karina B. Samaniego Estrada

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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

BEING UNDOCUMENTED IN THE UNITED STATES: THE IMPACT  
ON MEXICAN IMMIGRANTS' MENTAL HEALTH

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

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College of Education and Behavioral Sciences  
Department of Applied Psychology and Counselor Education  
Program of Counseling Psychology

December 2014

This Dissertation by: Karina B. Samaniego Estrada

Entitled: *Being Undocumented in the United States: The Impact on Mexican Immigrants' Mental Health*

has been approved as meeting the requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in College of Education and Behavioral Sciences in Department of Applied Psychology and Counselor Education, Program of Counseling Psychology

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## ABSTRACT

Samaniego Estrada, Karina B. *Being Undocumented in the United States: The Impact on Mexican Immigrants' Mental Health*. Published Doctor of Philosophy dissertation, University of Northern Colorado, 2014.

The purpose of this qualitative study was twofold: (a) to obtain a deep understanding of the phenomenon of being undocumented in the United States based on undocumented Mexican immigrants' experiences and perceptions and (b) to identify how immigrants' mental health was impacted by the phenomenon. A phenomenological research design was employed in this study and saturation was reached after a total of eight participants were interviewed. Several common themes emerged that described the participants' experiences in varying aspects of their lives: low wages; guilt; fear of driving; financial difficulties; social isolation; limitations exclusive to undocumented immigrants such as limited access to healthcare, no higher education opportunities, limited employment opportunities; feeling invisible in the U.S. culture; legal problems related to immigration; a psychological impact including psychological distress, stress, lacking in self-confidence, feeling of disillusionment, cultural adjustment difficulties, tolerating injustices; and seeing more opportunities than in Mexico. Participants also provided recommendations for mental health professionals in working with undocumented Mexican immigrants. The findings of this study supported the speculation that if an immigrant has an undocumented legal status, he or she might be at risk of experiencing higher acculturative stress and poorer mental health than immigrants with

documented legal status. Furthermore, additional information in the area of multicultural competencies for counseling psychologists might be gained through obtaining a more in-depth understanding of the lives and challenges of undocumented Mexican immigrants.

Through such understanding and knowledge of the experiences of undocumented Mexican immigrants, a broader context into the lives of this population could be obtained and empathic insights, in turn, might develop toward them.

Keywords: qualitative study, phenomenological study, undocumented immigrants, illegal immigrants, Mexican immigrants, mental health, minorities

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The completion of this study was not my own doing and I thank each participant for being willing to take the risk of talking to and trusting me enough to open up and share such intimate experiences. This study is first and foremost dedicated to you and others in your situation whom I did not have the privilege of interviewing. I continue to hope your stories were justly represented in the following pages and readers may find them helpful and feel compelled to use the information gathered to do good.

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **Introduction**

With the uncertainty of what lies ahead, many risk their lives in hopes of a better life--if not for themselves, at least for their loved ones. Some view the journey as temporary, while others know there is no turning back. Moving to a new city or state can be challenging for the average American but one will eventually adapt and be comfortable in one's new home. Yet, the undocumented immigrant knows he or she cannot be fully comfortable in this new world. That individual must live in the shadows and in constant vigilance for this person knows he or she does not belong. How can this individual belong if he or she does not exist?

The Department of Homeland Security (2010) estimated that in January 2010, there were 10.8 million unauthorized immigrants in the United States and 62% emigrated from Mexico. Additionally, as of 2009, about 40% of Hispanics in the United States are immigrants (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009a). The reasons those immigrants have for leaving behind their homelands, families, and friends vary. Whether it is to provide economic stability for their families or hopes of a better life, unauthorized immigrants undoubtedly risk their lives by crossing the U.S. border through deserts, rivers, and over oceans. The hazards of immigrating to the United States are many and range from crossing through underground tunnels infested with rats; hiding from immigration

officers; and possibly being killed, robbed, or raped (Breton & Ocegüera, 2008). It appears that many undocumented immigrants choose to put themselves at risk if there is a possibility of gaining economic opportunity (DeLuca, McEwen, & Keim, 2010). One study suggested that many prefer to run the risks of crossing the border than face the shame resulting from not providing for their families or losing stature (DeLuca et al., 2010). It is reasonable to conclude that the perceived benefits of crossing the border outweigh the perceived risks an undocumented immigrant may face (DeLuca et al., 2010).

Reaching U.S. territory, however, is no guarantee an undocumented Mexican immigrant will reach his or her goal of a better life. Based on statistical reports provided by the Department of Homeland Security (2011), Mexican immigrants account for the majority of apprehensions, detainments, removals, and returns to the undocumented immigrant's country of origin. In 2010, of the 517,000 undocumented immigrants who were apprehended in the United States, 83% were of Mexican origin (Department of Homeland Security, 2011). Of the 363,000 who were detained, 63% were from Mexico (Department of Homeland Security, 2011). Of the 387,000 who were removed from the United States, 73% were from Mexico. Finally, of the 476,000 who were returned back to their home countries, 81% involved Mexican or Canadian immigrants (Department of Homeland Security, 2011).

In addition to running the risk of being caught and sent back to Mexico, undocumented Mexican immigrants encounter risks to well-being (Bell, Kwesiga, & Berry, 2010) as well as to those of their families. Such risks increase, particularly as worksite raids to apprehend unauthorized immigrants also increase (Capps, Castañeda,

Chaudry, & Santos, 2007). Capps et al. (2007) reported that “the number of undocumented immigrants arrested at workplaces increased more than sevenfold from 500 to 3,600 between 2002 and 2006” (p. 1). The impact of the raids conducted at employment sites extended past the workers and onto their children who “experienced feelings of abandonment and showed symptoms of emotional trauma, psychological distress, and mental health problems” (Capps et al., 2007, p.3). Approximately 73% of undocumented immigrants’ children were born in the United States and, thus, are U.S. citizens (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009a). Moreover, children of undocumented immigrants make up about 6.8% of the elementary and secondary school students in the nation (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009a).

No matter what reasons undocumented immigrants have to leave their homeland, it appears those reasons are powerful enough for undocumented immigrants to risk their lives crossing the border. Nevertheless, the risks continue for undocumented immigrants because their psychological well-being is bound to suffer. Many Mexican immigrants may experience feelings of depression and disappointment upon realizing their expectations of earning large amounts of money must be lowered to a moderate income, while only some may be able to send money to their hometowns or “fulfill the immigrant’s dream” (Falicov, 2005, p.233). Separating themselves from loved ones and experiencing feelings of loss, language barriers, and culture shock are all common experiences of immigrants that can contribute to immigrants’ symptoms of distress (Kazdin, as cited in American Psychological Association [APA], 2011).

## **Research Questions**

Once the task of reaching U.S. land is accomplished, what new challenges await undocumented Mexican immigrants in a foreign land with a different culture? How are such challenges overcome? Do all undocumented Mexican immigrants experience the same challenges? What are the mental health needs of undocumented Mexican immigrants? What are some things those in the helping professions need to be aware of when providing services to the undocumented Mexican immigrant population? These questions were the basis for the current study. The following main research questions guided this study:

- Q1 What is it like to be an undocumented Mexican immigrant as determined by undocumented Mexican immigrants' experiences and perceptions?
- Q2 How is an undocumented Mexican immigrant's mental health impacted by his or her experiences in the United States?

## **Statement of Purpose**

One of the purposes of this study was to provide readers with an understanding of what it is like to be an undocumented Mexican immigrant in the United States based on undocumented Mexican immigrants' experiences and perceptions. Another purpose was to gain insight into the types of challenges undocumented Mexican immigrants face in the United States. A final purpose was to provide insight into the manner in which such experiences, perceptions, and challenges might impact undocumented Mexican immigrants' psychological well-being.

## **Need for Study**

For acculturation to be successful, the integration of an immigrant's culture of origin with that of his or her new place of residence is necessary (Kazdin, as cited in

APA, 2011). Psychological distress for an immigrant, however, can result from difficulties in speaking the new culture's language, separating from family, experiencing culture shock, and experiencing feelings of loss (Kazdin, as cited in APA, 2011). Studies have shown a positive relationship among acculturative stress, suicidal ideation, and depression among Hispanic immigrants of different nationalities (Hovey, 2000a, 2000b). One such study reported elevated levels of anxiety and depression among Mexican immigrant farm workers who were experiencing high levels of acculturative stress (Hovey & Magaña, 2000). Additionally, results of the study also suggested that immigrants who are already experiencing high levels of acculturative stress might also be at risk for experiencing psychological distress (Hovey & Magaña, 2000).

Thus, immigrants already undergoing the process of acculturation, a stressful experience, might find themselves experiencing even higher levels of stress when faced with dealing with the struggles of being undocumented. In addition to the massive challenges all immigrants must face when arriving to a new country, it is expected that they might arrive in a new country with a history of trauma experienced in their countries of origin (DeAngelis, 2011). For these reasons, it is especially important that immigrants and their families receive the appropriate psychological services (DeAngelis, 2011). During this time of economic hardship in the United States, immigrants have become easy targets to blame for the loss of jobs and discrimination (DeAngelis, 2011).

The American Psychological Association's former president, Melba J. T. Vasquez, identified immigration as a significant issue needing to be addressed (Azar, 2011). To illustrate the magnitude of this issue, Dr. Vasquez created a task force on immigration to address psychological factors involved in the immigration experience,



paying particular attention to the behavioral and mental health needs of immigrants throughout their life span (Azar, 2011). Additionally, the immigration task force intended to study how prejudice, acculturation, immigration policy, and discrimination affected society, families, and individuals (Azar, 2011). In the task force report, undocumented immigrants were identified as a group with unique challenges (APA, 2012).

By gaining a more in-depth understanding of those issues undocumented immigrants experience as sources of stress, this study can expand the literature on acculturative stress and introduce cultural variables (e.g., undocumented legal status) to the literature on depression and anxiety. Results from the current study might also help improve mental health interventions for undocumented immigrants and their families. Consistent with a family systems approach to counseling, the manner in which a family functions has implications for the well-being of each of its members (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008). Therefore, it is essential to understand the struggles of each family member because those struggles might be impacting other members (e.g., children) of the same unit. Studies have shown that constant stress can lead to a number of physical illnesses (Knoll & Carlezon, 2009), memory loss (Wolf, 2009), and depressive disorders (Choi, Fauce, & Effros, 2008). Hence, if one family member (e.g., undocumented parent) is experiencing psychological distress, it is possible this imbalance in the family unit might also affect other family members and their functioning (e.g., a child's psychological well-being or academic performance).

It is also important to focus attention on this particular group of immigrants for two reasons: (a) their children make up 6.8% of the elementary and secondary school

students in the nation and (b) their own children's psychological health might be at risk. Mental health professionals should take into consideration that undocumented parents might be less likely to seek mental health services for themselves or their children for fear of being caught by immigration authorities (DeAngelis, 2011). As a result, children of undocumented parents might experience negative psychological, developmental, and physical effects by not having adequate access to the health services they need (DeAngelis, 2011).

### **Summary**

Overall, there is little research focusing on the psychological well-being of undocumented immigrants. For this reason, the current study can contribute to the diversity research literature about undocumented Mexican immigrants. Counseling psychologists are among the primary groups of professionals to benefit from this advancement in the literature as it will be important for the development of multicultural competencies when working with undocumented immigrants and their families. Understanding the worldview from the client's perspective is a necessary step toward building a relationship with a client. By gaining a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of undocumented immigrants in the United States, psychotherapists and other professionals can be better equipped to help them and their families.

### **Delimitations**

The focus of this study was to obtain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of Mexican adults who reside in the United States of America as undocumented immigrants.

## Definitions

**Acculturation.** A term used to describe the changes members of a particular culture experience when they come in contact with another culture (Williams & Berry, 1991).

**Acculturative stress.** A type of stress that has its source in the acculturation process and might be manifested in a variety of ways such as feelings of depression, anxiety, alienation, psychosomatic symptoms, or identity confusion (Berry, Kim, Minde, & Mok, 1987).

**Apprehension.** The seizure of an undocumented immigrant by the Department of Homeland Security and might or might not involve his or her arrest (Department of Homeland Security, 2011).

**Detention.** Holding an apprehended undocumented immigrant through incarceration, awaiting legal proceedings, transportation to return to his or her country of citizenship, or judicial proceedings (Department of Homeland Security, 2011).

**Familismo.** The concept of family interdependence among Mexican American families (Falicov, 2005).

**Mental health.** The mental and emotional well-being of an individual.

**Removal.** Transporting an apprehended undocumented immigrant back to his or her country of citizenship following an order of removal (Department of Homeland Security, 2011).

**Return.** Possibly allowing an apprehended undocumented immigrant return to his or her country of citizenship without being placed in immigration proceedings (Department of Homeland Security, 2011).

**Undocumented/unauthorized immigrants/illegal aliens/aliens.** Those immigrants who are not legally authorized by the federal government to reside in the United States of America.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter presents research related to both documented and undocumented immigrants. There is a scarcity in the literature about factors that impact undocumented immigrants in particular. Literature about Mexican immigrants is available but some publications do not specify if participants in those studies were documented or not. For publications where legal status among immigrants was identified, the terms *documented* or *undocumented* are used to clarify the findings in each of those publications. In publications where legal status was not identified, the term *immigrant* is used and such findings might apply to documented and undocumented or only to documented immigrants.

#### **Mexican Migration**

Historically, Mexico and the United States have gone through periods where Mexican workers are recruited by U.S. employers, relocated, and granted legalization and periods during which immigration to the United States is illegal and punished--all dependent on the economic needs between the two countries (Falicov, 2005). For many years, Mexicans have not been granted legal-alien status in the United States, yet immigration rates have risen (Falicov, 2005). Antagonism toward immigrants has led to the approval of anti-immigrant laws such as California's Proposition 187, which denies

education, health care, and other social services to undocumented immigrants (Falicov, 2005).

### **Risks of Crossing the United States-Mexico Border**

Among the many hazards undocumented immigrants face when crossing the United States-Mexico border are dehydration, cold and heat injuries, and encounters with wild animals (DeLuca et al., 2010). Heat-related injuries, heat stroke in particular, have accounted for over 100 deaths in the Arizona-Mexico border each year since 2001 (DeLuca et al., 2010).

A qualitative study was conducted to learn about the experiences of undocumented adult males who had been returned to Mexico after attempting to cross the United States-Mexico border (DeLuca et al., 2010). Specifically, researchers sought to understand how undocumented immigrants perceived the risks of attempting to cross the United States-Mexico border, what risks were actually encountered, and the manner in which such risks influenced their willingness to try crossing again (DeLuca et al., 2010). A total of eight undocumented adult male immigrants were interviewed (DeLuca et al., 2010).

Six categories were derived from the data analysis: families as primary motivator to cross, things immigrants were told about the crossing experience, the actual risks encountered while crossing, families as a source of inspiration, experiences of an unsuccessful crossing, and a willingness to try crossing again (DeLuca et al., 2010). The first theme identified immigrants' families as the reason why immigrants crossed the border (DeLuca et al., 2010). All participants stated the main reason they wanted to cross the border was to find employment and help improve their families' lives (DeLuca et al.,

2010). For those participants who were married, reasons included providing for their school-aged children, to help pay for health care costs, and to help their siblings improve their situation in Mexico (DeLuca et al., 2010).

The second theme revolved around the information participants received regarding the crossing experience (DeLuca et al., 2010). All participants stated they had heard about risks of crossing the United States-Mexico border illegally (DeLuca et al., 2010). Several of the participants reported they had not been prepared for the crossing experience (DeLuca et al., 2010).

The third theme was derived from the actual risks encountered during the crossing experience (DeLuca et al., 2010): fear of being robbed or abandoned by their guide, being caught by Border Patrol officers, and the extreme temperatures in the desert. Two participants stated they were abandoned by their guide when immigration officers arrived. Several participants ran out of water and described dehydration symptoms they experienced (DeLuca et al., 2010).

The fourth theme involved immigrants referring back to their families for inspiration to continue or give up (DeLuca et al., 2010). Participants reported a sense of courage and motivation from thinking about their families. When faced with challenging crossing experiences, participants thought about their families and some decided to continue while others did not run from immigration officers (DeLuca et al., 2010).

The fifth theme described participants' unsuccessful experiences in crossing (DeLuca et al., 2010). Experiences ranged from being apprehended by immigration officers, an experience to which some expressed relief, to being abandoned by their

guide. In addition, participants stated that being apprehended did not guarantee a safe return home just as having a guide did not guarantee a safe passing (DeLuca et al., 2010).

Participants' strong desire to make a better life for themselves and their families was evidenced by the sixth theme in which participants stated they would try to cross again (DeLuca et al., 2010). Residing permanently in the United States was not part of the participants' goals. Rather, they strongly wished to earn as much as they could and return to Mexico (DeLuca et al., 2010). Other participants decided not to try crossing again as the risks were too great. It was noted that participants who decided not to cross again felt a deep sense of failure--both at not having been able to cross and at providing for their families. Results of the study supported the notion that many undocumented immigrants seemed willing to put themselves at significant risk with the end result of obtaining better economic opportunities in the United States (DeLuca et al., 2010). DeLuca et al. (2010) also suggested that the shame resulting from not providing for their families along with losing stature in their home communities might also be perceived as great risks to immigrants. Consequently, immigrants might be willing to put their well-being at risk to avoid the greater risks of shame and loss of stature. For undocumented immigrants, it appeared the perceived risks of crossing the United States-Mexico border were not as strong as the perceived benefits (DeLuca et al., 2010).

### **Factors Impacting Undocumented Immigrants' Mental Health**

#### **Immigrant Distress**

Migration typically causes a disruption of lifelong attachments (e.g., family, friends, and culture) and displacement from established values (Falicov, 2005). The changes caused by migration can create different types of psychological distress such as:



psychosomatic symptoms (e.g., insomnia, dizziness, palpitations; Falicov, 2005); depression and anxiety (Warheit, Vega, Auth, & Meinhardt, 1985); social alienation, psychological conflict, and marginality (Grinberg & Grinberg, 1989; Shuval, 1982); and culture shock (Falicov, 2005).

In addition to the challenges undocumented immigrants might encounter while crossing U.S. borders, the added challenge of acculturating to a new country and culture might also create stress. Among the many barriers immigrants face adjusting to U.S. culture are discrimination (Perreira, Chapman, & Stein, 2006; Perrilla, Wilson, & Wold, 1998; Shinnar, 2007), not speaking the English language (Burgos, 2002; Dale et al., 2005; Perreira et al., 2006; Perrilla et al., 1998; Shinnar, 2007), financial difficulties (Dalla, Gupta, Lopez, & Jones, 2006), separation from family members who stayed in the country of origin (Alderete, Vega, Kolody, & Aguilar-Gaziola, 1999; Grzywacz, Quandt, Arcury, & Marin, 2005; Grzywacz et al., 2006; Magaña & Hovey, 2003; Perreira et al., 2006), and strain in their family roles (Burgos, 2002; Dalla et al., 2006; Hirsch, 1999). While the processes of acculturation and immigration are believed to be stressful experiences impacting immigrants' psychological well-being, it might be that only particular events occurring throughout these processes actually increased the possibility of developing mental health problems (Liebkind & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2000). Feeling isolated, experiencing discrimination as a result of not speaking the language of the host country, and having a history of trauma appear to place an immigrant at risk for experiencing mental health problems (Canadian Task Force, Liebkind, as cited in Liebkind & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2000).

The research has identified higher levels of difficulty or distress among immigrant individuals when compared to non-immigrants (Lay & Safdar, 2003, Taloyan, Johansson, Johansson, Sundquist, & Kocturk, 2006). Among the college student population, immigrant or minority students have more acculturation-specific difficulties when compared to non-immigrant or non-minority students (Lay & Safdar, 2003). In Europe, Kurdish immigrants in Sweden were found to have higher levels of distress when compared to native Swedish men (Taloyan et al., 2006). Overall, these studies suggested that immigrants appeared to be facing specific stressors that non-immigrants were not facing, which increased immigrants' levels of distress.

### **Lack of Family Support**

Mexican Americans hold family values in high regard (Falicov, 2005). Families might include a variety of family members such as grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles, and never married, widowed, or divorced individuals. Families may be extended, nuclear, or single-parented (Falicov, 2005). Ties among family members, including third and fourth cousins, are often strong, particularly among siblings. Relationships such as that of the child and parent are especially valued in Mexican culture and, when combined with the value for respect toward parents, might have precedence over the relationship between husband and wife (Falicov, 2005). Families might provide for extended family members' companionship, sharing of financial responsibility, problem solving, and sharing of raising children--a concept known as familismo (Falicov, 2005). Hence, having the support of family is crucial as Mexican Americans are more likely to turn to family than outsiders when in need. Based on the interdependence between Mexican family members, it is important to consider that undocumented Mexican immigrants who

leave their families in Mexico might experience great challenges in a country where they lack the family support they are accustomed to receiving.

### **Legal Status as a Barrier to Health Care**

Undocumented parents might resist seeking mental health services for many reasons (Breton & Ocegüera, 2008). Fear as a barrier to seeking health care was identified among a sample of undocumented Latino adults (Berk & Schur, 2001). In a sample of 756 participants from Texas and California, 39% reported they feared denial of health care due to their legal status in the country (Berk & Schur, 2001). When a professional was able to reach a family to recommend services, some parents withheld important information to the mental health provider for fear of being reported to immigration (Breton & Ocegüera, 2008). Others might be hesitant to attend a mental health clinic because they are unaware of services available to them. Some might be unaware that services might be available in their native language (Breton & Ocegüera, 2008). Another common barrier might be that the parents hold two jobs to sustain their families and are unable to take time off work to attend therapy (Breton & Ocegüera, 2008).

### **Discrimination**

One of the various factors of distress among immigrants is racial discrimination (Mak & Nesdale, 2001). Higher levels of psychological distress were found among first-generation Chinese Australian migrants who perceived having been racially discriminated against (Mak & Nesdale, 2001). In the same study, migrants who possessed sufficient internal (e.g., generalized self-efficacy, self-esteem, and self-assessed English fluency) and external (e.g., number of friends) coping resources were

less likely to show higher levels of psychological distress (Mak & Nesdale, 2001). These results direct our attention to the significance of identifying stressors for migrant distress as well as of having adequate coping resources available to them (Mak & Nesdale, 2001).

Another study examined whether self-reported discrimination was associated with mental health status among African descendants, Mexican Americans, and other Latinos (Gee, Ryan, Laflamme, & Holt, 2006). All of the Mexican American participants in this study were immigrants. Using a measure of overall psychological well-being, researchers in this study inquired about participants' social functioning, physical functioning, general health, mental health, bodily pain, role functioning, and vitality (Gee et al., 2006). Higher scores on the measure used indicated better mental health. Both African descendants and Mexican Americans reported similar levels of discrimination in health care (Gee et al., 2006). When asked if they felt racial discrimination reduced their ability to fully achieve their goals, Mexican Americans' reports were higher than any other groups in the study. When asked how often participants felt anger or discomfort due to the way other people treated them in their everyday life because of their race, African descendants' reports were highest, followed by Mexican Americans' (Gee et al., 2006). Overall, this study showed a negative association between mental health status and reports of discrimination. Specifically, racial or ethnic discrimination was associated with poor mental health (Gee et al., 2006). It is noteworthy that immigrants were less likely to utilize mental health services when they perceived prejudice toward them from the community in which they lived (DeAngelis, 2011).

Another study aimed at understanding the impact of immigrants' experiences of discrimination on their psychological stress and trust in authorities (Liebkind &

Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2000). The study included a sample of seven groups of immigrants, a total of 1,146 participants, in Finland. Immigrant groups included Turks, Estonians, Russians, Vietnamese, Arabs, and Ingrian/Finnish returnees. Ages of participants ranged from 20 to 36 (Liebkind & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2000). Researchers concluded that immigrant groups who are more culturally and ethnically distinctive or visible than the host group experienced more discrimination than those who were less visible.

Vietnamese participants reported less experiences of discrimination when compared to the other six immigrant groups (Liebkind & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2000). Researchers concluded that one of the reasons for this difference in reported discrimination experiences might be due to the similarities in cultural characteristics of both Vietnamese and Finnish populations. In other words, when the immigrant culture and the host culture appeared to “fit” (Liebkind & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2000, p. 13) culturally, the immigrant culture experienced less discrimination from the host culture than did the more culturally distant immigrant groups.

Results of the study also showed that those immigrants who had lived longer in the host country also experienced more discrimination, such as everyday racism, than immigrants who had recently arrived (Liebkind & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2000). Furthermore, participants in the study who reported experiences of discrimination also reported an increase in psychological stress symptoms and decreased trust in the authorities of the host country. A conflicting, yet interesting finding in this study was one in which the group of immigrants who reported the most discrimination, the Somalis, also reported less symptoms of stress than two groups of immigrants who reported the least amount of discrimination--Russians and Ingrian/Finnish returnees (Liebkind & Jasinskaja-Lahti,

2000). Conversely, the Russian and Ingrian/Finnish groups reported higher levels of stress than the Somali immigrant group. It was suggested that while some visible minority members who experienced discrimination might be able to protect their self-esteem and self-concept from being damaged by attributing the discrimination to external factors, members of less visible groups might not be able to do so (Liebkind & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2000). When members of a less visible minority group do not experience discrimination continuously, it might be easier for them to attribute negative experiences to internal factors such as due to personal inadequacies. Consequently, members of the less visible group might experience psychological distress as a result of internalizing the negative experiences (Liebkind & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2000).

Due to their dark-skin, Mexicans experience more discrimination and are deported more often than other groups (Falicov, 2005). Due to the commonality of racial discrimination in Mexico against dark-skinned Mexicans, Mexican immigrants might enter the United States with internalized self-hatred, which might be further fueled by more discrimination in the United States. Problems of isolation, work situation, and unawareness of resources in the community are common among Mexican Americans (Falicov, 2005). Mexican Americans typically rely on family members than outsiders including institutions. The concept of familismo is common among Mexican Americans and involves family members sharing responsibilities such as raising children, solving problems, finances, and keeping a family member company (Falicov, 2005).

### **Acculturative Stress**

The studies referenced previously are connected to a phenomenon now known as acculturative stress. To better understand acculturative stress, attention must be paid to a

notion known as acculturation. Acculturation is a term used to describe the changes members of a particular culture experience when they come in contact with a culture different from their own, resulting in further changes to the cultural patterns in either culture (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936). Acculturative experiences vary from person to person (Williams & Berry, 1991). Thus, an individual's acculturative process would differ from that of another individual (Williams & Berry, 1991). Acculturative stress has its source in the acculturation process and might be manifested in a variety of ways such as feelings of depression, anxiety, alienation, psychosomatic symptoms, or identity confusion (Berry et al., 1987). Thus, acculturative stress might have a negative impact on the well-being of individuals (Williams & Berry, 1991).

Two major variables were identified in one model of acculturative stress: acculturation experience and stressors (Berry et al., 1987). The relationship between acculturation experience and stressors resulted in high or low levels of acculturative stress. Within the same model, several factors affected the relationship between acculturation and stress: (a) nature of the larger society, (b) type of acculturating group, (c) modes of acculturation, (d) psychological characteristics of the person, and (e) demographic and social characteristics of the person. The interaction among all five factors and the acculturation process could result in high or low levels of acculturative stress for the individual (Berry et al., 1987). Each of the five factors is described next.

**Factor one: Nature of the larger society.** The first factor, nature of the larger society, refers to characteristics of the new culture, e.g., being acceptant or tolerant of cultural diversity, or of the availability of social or cultural groups to provide support for immigrants (Williams & Berry, 1991). Existing policies that exclude certain immigrant

groups from participating in the larger society might increase levels of acculturative stress (Williams & Berry, 1991). In the case of U.S. culture, researchers have indicated that some communities might not be prepared to meet the needs of Latino immigrants when compared to established immigrant communities (Flores et al., 2011).

Latinos are reportedly increasing their presence in Midwestern rural areas where dairy, meatpacking, and poultry processing industries are housed (Flores et al., 2011). The implications of the trend in employment of Latino workers in rural areas vary. Employers might benefit from hiring workers who are flexible in terms of the conditions in which they work including being hired on an as needed basis as opposed to having a steady job (Flores et al., 2011). Yet, while employers might reap the benefits of hiring Latino immigrants, elsewhere in the community, Latinos might be perceived as a threat, both economically and symbolically, by people native to the community (Fennelly, 2008; Hetzler, Medina, & Overfelt, 2007).

An example of such a perception included the time when immigrant and migrant workers arrived in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina; the perception was that African Americans, the people native to the New Orleans community, would be displaced (Fennelly, 2008). Additionally, the perception was that New Orleans would become “Nuevo” Orleans. Another such example was the integration of Latino immigrants and Somali refugees in a Minnesota meatpacking town (Fennelly, 2008). In the Minnesota town, the perception was the newcomers would have a negative impact on the town’s business, property values, school budgets, and crime rates (Fennelly, 2008).

Additionally, the rejection of undocumented immigrants by some people in the larger society has been made apparent through passing of laws such as Arizona’s



stringent law on immigration (Arizona Senate Bill 1070, 2010), which allows police officers to detain individuals they suspect might be undocumented and to verify their status with federal officials. Taken as a whole, it is possible undocumented immigrants throughout the nation might perceive an anti-immigrant sentiment, which could consequently increase their acculturative stress levels.

**Factor two: Type of acculturating group.** The second factor, type of acculturating group, could be related to whether the migration was voluntary; this might be the case with refugees or to the length of stay in the new culture (Berry et al., 1987). In the case of undocumented Mexican immigrants, immigration to the United States might be voluntary in the sense that they made a decision to cross and risk their lives while crossing. On the other hand, it is possible they made the decision to cross based on the perceived pressure to provide a better life for themselves and their families. Length of stay likely varies from immigrant to immigrant and this specific factor influences the type of acculturating group--undocumented Mexican immigrants.

**Factor three: Modes of acculturation.** The third factor, modes of acculturation, refers to the reactions of the immigrant group toward the acculturation process. In this process, the immigrant group or individual might seek assimilation with the new culture and choose to separate, integrate, or remain marginalized from the new group or culture (Berry et al., 1987). In the case of undocumented Mexican immigrants, reactions toward acculturation processes might come from the acculturation processes of the undocumented immigrant or of his or her family. Acculturative stress might also be experienced as tension between immigrant parents and their children as the latter adapt to U.S. culture (DeAngelis, 2011).

**Factor four: Psychological characteristics of immigrant.** The fourth factor, psychological characteristics of the person, highlights the importance of things like coping skills, which might impact the adaptation process for the individual or group (Berry et al., 1987). Immigrants appear to possess resilient characteristics to the surprise of many but three factors have the capacity to undermine the mental health of immigrants: trauma, discrimination, and acculturative stress (DeAngelis, 2011). Trauma can have its origins in the new country, the immigrant's native country, or during the journey to the new country (De Angelis, 2011). Equally, undocumented adults and their children might experience trauma in the new country. Undocumented adults might experience robbery or rape during while crossing the U.S. border (Breton & Ocegüera, 2008). Children of undocumented adults might be traumatized by watching their parents being detained by immigration officers (DeAngelis, 2011). Thus, immigrants might arrive in the United States with poor psychological health. Little is known about the psychological characteristics of undocumented immigrants. Based on participants' responses, the current study might be able to provide useful information to better understand the psychological characteristics of undocumented immigrants.

**Factor five: Demographic and social characteristics of immigrant.** The fifth factor, demographic and social characteristics of the person, refers to social and cultural qualities such as socioeconomic status, education, and employment in the new culture (Williams & Berry, 1991). According to Williams and Berry (1991), the entry status of an individual into a new society is usually lower than the departure status from the original society and might result in increased stress. An example of this is an individual who in their country of origin was an educator but upon arriving became a server at a

restaurant. In the United States, the majority of Mexican American immigrants have low socioeconomic status and jobs with low prestige (Falicov, 2005). In the case of undocumented Mexican immigrants, entry status might always be lower for them considering that without proper documentation, finding employment is oftentimes very challenging and the jobs available to them are typically brown-collar jobs (Catanzarite, 2002).

When compared to other foreign-born immigrants, Latinos tend to have lower levels of education and income, are younger, and live in higher rates of poverty (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009a). Mexican immigrants as a group are younger than other Latino immigrant groups (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009b). Additionally, a higher percentage of Mexican immigrants tend to be male when compared to other immigrant groups (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009b). Latinos also tend to work in what are referred to as brown-collar jobs or jobs that are low skilled, low paying, and physically demanding (Catanzarite, 2002). Within the Latino immigrant population, Mexican immigrants currently have higher unemployment rates (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009b). When compared to non-immigrants, immigrants generally earn lower wages and receive worse interpersonal treatment in their place of employment (Rivera-Batiz, 1999). Yet, the barriers undocumented immigrants face in the realm of employment in the United States are likely different than those of documented immigrants. For example, undocumented immigrants are less likely to report workplace hazards for fear of being deported (Massachusetts Coalition for Occupational Safety & Health, 2009).

It is important to understand Latino immigrants' perceptions about work, their work conditions, and the process they go through when searching for jobs because all

these can impact their health (Flores et al., 2011). In their study, Flores et al. (2011) sought to investigate the experiences of Latino immigrants in communities where immigration was relatively new. Participants in this study consisted of men and women from Mexico and El Salvador (Flores et al., 2011). Results from the study provided a deeper understanding of Latino immigrants' experiences in the workforce. Five themes were derived describing immigrants' career development: work for survival and power, work for social connections, work as self-determination, barriers to work in the Midwest, and access to work in the Midwest (Flores et al., 2011).

The first theme was based on participants' experiences with work for the purpose of obtaining power and surviving (Flores et al., 2011). Participants described having difficult and demanding jobs but preferred to work under those conditions than not work at all. Apparently, Latino immigrants' need for employment and their desire to help their families survive were strong enough motivators to keep immigrants working under difficult and dangerous conditions. Other reasons Latino immigrants had for seeking employment were to obtain power by enhancing their skills or obtaining a promotion (Flores et al., 2011).

The second theme described that Latino immigrants used their employment sites as a means to develop social relations and support (Flores et al., 2011). Participants reported positive and negative co-worker and supervisor interactions. Their experiences ranged from feeling supported by others to experiencing mistreatment and discrimination. Additionally, participants in this study described their workplace as a means of connecting with people of their same culture or religious faith (Flores et al., 2011).

The third theme related to participants' attitudes about work (Flores et al., 2011). Responses ranged from participants having a strong work ethic and liking to work to viewing employment in the United States as a privilege. The fourth theme identified a range of challenges Latino immigrants faced when it came to working in the Midwest (Flores et al., 2011). English skills and work documents were found to be common barriers expressed by most of the participants. Lack of English fluency was reported to be the most important barrier participants in this study encountered (Flores et al., 2011). Regarding work documents as a barrier, participants reported experiencing difficulty in finding employment and speaking out in their workplaces for fear of drawing attention to themselves and being retaliated against. The last theme identified related to resources participants used to access work. Among those were family as a network as well as community resources and others (Flores et al., 2011).

Thus, legal status of an immigrant could be an influencing factor and contribute to elevated acculturative stress. This conclusion could be drawn by taking into consideration the fifth factor affecting the relationship between acculturation and stress (i.e., demographic and social characteristics of the person) in Berry et al.'s (1987) acculturative stress model and Hovey and King's (1997) expansion of Berry et al.'s model. Progress in Mexico is to own a small business or own a home (Rouse, 1992) and many Mexican immigrants hold on to those ideals (Falicov, 2005). When an undocumented immigrant faces challenges to reaching these ideals, it is possible he or she might experience psychological distress. Despite the fact that studies have been conducted to further understand acculturative stress and its impact on the well-being of immigrants, a gap still exists in the literature when it comes to understanding the

psychological impact of legal status among undocumented immigrants. In the current study, legal status is proposed to be a demographic and social characteristic of an immigrant and, consequently, a contributing factor to acculturative stress.

### **Anxiety, Depression, and Acculturative Stress**

An extension to Berry et al.'s (1987) acculturative stress model included the consequences of elevated levels of acculturative stress (Hovey & King, 1997). In their model, Hovey and King (1997) suggested that "individuals who experience elevated levels of acculturative stress may be at risk for the development of depression and suicidal ideation" (p. 137). The notion that people experiencing high levels of acculturative stress could develop depression and suicidal ideation was also supported by several other studies (Hovey, 2000a, 2000b; Hovey & King, 1996; Hovey & Magaña, 2002).

One such study was conducted to explore the relationship among acculturative stress, depressive symptoms, and suicidal ideation in a sample of immigrant and second-generation Latino adolescents (Hovey & King, 1996). Results from the study indicated a positive relationship among depression and suicidal ideation and acculturative stress. Another similar study was conducted with a sample of Central American immigrants (Hovey, 2000a). The results of the study also indicated that acculturative stress was significantly correlated with elevated levels of depression and suicidal ideation among this particular group. Yet another study was conducted to examine the relationship among acculturative stress, depression, and suicidal ideation but this time in a sample of Mexican immigrants (Hovey, 2000b). The results suggested that those Mexican immigrants who experienced high levels of acculturative stress could be at risk of

experiencing high levels of depression and suicidal ideation (Hovey, 2000b). A study on a sample of Mexican migrant farm workers was conducted and found elevated levels of acculturative stress among the overall sample (Hovey & Magaña, 2002). Findings indicated those migrant workers with higher levels of stress were more likely to also experience higher levels of anxiety and depression (Hovey & Magaña, 2002).

### **Summary**

In general, immigrants experience higher levels of stress when compared to non-immigrants (Lay & Safdar, 2003, Taloyan et al., 2006). Due to their disadvantaged legal status, undocumented Mexican immigrants might be at risk of experiencing higher levels of acculturative stress including anxiety and depression. Isolation, tensions due to differences between norms at home and norms outside of the home, and lack of awareness about community resources are common social and cultural problems among Mexican Americans (Falicov, 2005). To gain a deeper understanding about such issues, Falicov (2005) suggested inquiring about the immigrant's relationships such as extended family, friendships, or school; his or her neighborhood including housing, crime, safety, or gangs; and his or her employment situation such as his or her job stability, income, and occupation. Understanding the challenges specific to having an undocumented legal status in the United States, which might be part of an undocumented immigrant's acculturative experience, could provide relevant information to culturally competent mental health professionals when treating undocumented Mexican immigrants and their families.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter describes the methodology of the current study. Consistent with qualitative research methods, the philosophy of science is described so as to provide the reader with a background about ontology, axiology, and methodology that guided the research process. Additionally, a brief review of other methodologies is provided and contrasted to the methodology selected for the current study. This was done in an effort to demonstrate the appropriateness of the methodology selected in answering the research questions and meeting the objectives of the current study. An explanation of phenomenology as the most appropriate methodology for the current study follows.

I also provide an overview of my stance as a researcher in the current study. A detailed description of participants, researcher role, and procedures is provided so the reader has a more complete understanding of the manner in which the current study was conducted. Given the nature of the current study, issues of translations and ethical considerations are also discussed. The chapter concludes with a discussion of trustworthiness issues of the current study and its limitations.

#### **Philosophy of Science**

A philosophy of science overarches assumptions about (a) ontology or the researcher's beliefs about the nature of reality, (b) epistemology or how knowledge is



acquired and the relationship between the researcher and participant, (c) axiology or the role and place for values in the study, and (d) methodology or the process and steps taken during the study (Ponterotto, 2005). Three epistemologies identified in qualitative research include (a) objectivism or the belief in an objective truth that can be discovered and exists outside of what an individual makes of it, (b) subjectivism or the belief that no single reality exists outside of what individuals assign it, and (c) constructionist or the belief that each person constructs meanings as a result of their experiences (Crotty, 1998).

A paradigm encompasses the researcher's set of assumptions about the social world (Ponterotto, 2005). Selecting a paradigm is important to the qualitative researcher because it sets the context for the study and dictates how the research is evaluated (Ponterotto, 2005). Qualitative researchers who ground their methodologies in a paradigm are provided direction in their research (Creswell, 2007; Crotty, 1998).

The current study was guided by a constructionist paradigm, which adopts a relativist view of the nature of reality where several and equally valid realities exist (Ponterotto, 2005). In this position, reality is subjective and influenced by the individual's experiences with his or her environment as well as with other individuals including the researcher. A constructivist stance embraces a hermeneutical approach-- meaning is hidden and obtained through deep reflection (Ponterotto, 2005). The interaction between researcher and participant is crucial because it stimulates the reflection needed to uncover deeper meaning. A constructivist paradigm also holds that a researcher's values and experiences cannot be excluded from the research process. For

this reason, a researcher must identify and describe his or her values and experiences relevant to the study (Ponterotto, 2005).

### **Research Design**

Researchers working from a constructivist paradigm often utilize naturalistic research designs due to the emphasis on the interaction between the researcher and participant (Ponterotto, 2005). Naturalistic inquiry lends itself to methods that facilitate in-depth interviewing and observation of participants (Ponterotto, 2005). Methodologies such as case study, grounded theory, and phenomenology are commonly used within the constructivist paradigm.

A case study methodology shares some of the basic characteristics of qualitative research: it searches for meaning and understanding of a phenomenon, the researcher is the primary instrument of information collection and analysis, and the end product is richly descriptive (Stake, 1994). It is also characterized by its focus on a bounded system, whether it is an individual, group, program, or institution (Merriam, 2009). To determine if a topic meets the criteria of boundedness, a researcher might ask whether there is a limit to the number of participants involved in the research or if there would be a finite number of observations (Merriam, 2009). If there is no limit to the number of participants or observations to be carried out, then the study does not meet the criteria for a case study methodology and another methodology must be used (Merriam, 2009). From a constructivist perspective, each experience is considered unique. Unless I was seeking to understand the experience of one undocumented immigrant, I would have to include every undocumented immigrant in the United States in the current study to truly understand what this experience is like for each of them. With the millions of

undocumented immigrants in the United States, it would not be feasible to determine the number of participants to be included in the current study. Thus, there cannot be a finite number of observations or participants. For this reason, a case study methodology was not considered the best approach for the current study.

When conducting research using grounded theory methodology, a researcher seeks to develop a theory or general explanation of a process, action, or interaction shaped by the views of a large number of participants based on the data collected (Creswell, Hanson, Clark Plano, & Morales, 2007; Merriam, 2009). The theory derived is based on a specific incident or process rather than general situations or phenomena (Merriam, 2009). Given that the goal of grounded theory methodology is to derive meaning from the data collected and to develop a theory that emerges from the data, it was not considered the best fit for the current study where the purpose was to understand a phenomenon (Merriam, 2009).

Phenomenology is best suited for studies in which the goal is to provide a deep understanding of a phenomenon experienced by several people (Creswell, 2007). This approach was congruent with the purpose of the current study since it set out to understand the conscious experience of an undocumented immigrant's life or world (Merriam, 2009). Therefore, a phenomenological research design was used to guide the current study in its quest to understand the phenomenon of being an undocumented immigrant in the United States. The assumption behind phenomenology is there is an essence to a shared experience (Merriam, 2009). It was the goal of the current study to provide a description of the universal essence of being an undocumented immigrant (Creswell et al., 2007).

### **Researcher Stance**

When utilizing a phenomenological research design, the primary method of collecting information is through interviews with individuals who have experienced the phenomenon of interest (Merriam, 2009). Prior to conducting interviews, the researcher must explore his or her own views and experiences with the phenomenon under study for two reasons: (a) to become aware of his or her own biases, prejudices, etc. and (b) to examine dimensions of the experience and temporarily set them aside so they do not interfere with seeing the elements of the phenomenon (a process also known as *epoche*; Merriam, 2009). For these reasons, I now describe my stance in the current study.

My personal background and experiences are relevant to the current study and influenced my decision to pursue a study focused on undocumented immigrants in the United States. As a bilingual and first-generation Mexican immigrant, I have experienced struggles related to acculturating to a new country and culture. Growing up in predominantly Hispanic areas, I became friends with many undocumented immigrants. As an adult, I have had the opportunity to interact, both professionally and personally, with documented and undocumented immigrants from different countries of origin.

As a teenager, I frequented recreational settings where other young Hispanic people gathered--many of them undocumented. At around the age of 19, I began to notice which at the time seemed to me as odd behaviors among a particular group of young Hispanic men. Many of them were extremely shy, almost fearful. They appeared sad and some seemed lost. Judging by their physical appearance and dress style, it was

obvious to me they were from out of town, actually from out of the country. I concluded that they must have been recent immigrants, most likely undocumented. It was around this time I became curious about what might be happening with those young men.

As a result of my constant interaction with documented and undocumented immigrants, I began noticing that undocumented immigrants possessed many more worries than documented immigrants. Some undocumented immigrants did not own a vehicle because they did not have a driver's license. Those who dared to drive without a license had to ask a friend to register the car under his or her name. Many would not travel far from home for fear of being stopped in traffic without a valid license. Not once did I meet an acquaintance or friend who sought professional help (i.e., therapy) to deal with his or her struggles.

It is also important that I discuss my previous marriage to an undocumented immigrant. During the time my ex-husband was undocumented, I experienced the impact an individual's legal status has on those around him. Due to the limited job opportunities for someone without a valid Social Security number, financial difficulties were common in our household. Additionally, knowing we could be separated permanently if he were ever deported was reason for constant worry. When faced with an unfair situation, oftentimes he would not speak up or stand up for himself if the situation involved an American who could threaten his stay in the country. As his partner, I too felt frustration and the feeling of powerlessness when I learned about such unfortunate situations. After he became fully documented, his reaction to unjust situations was different. I can only assume his change was at least minimally related to his new legal status in this country.

As a counselor in training, I noticed the discrepancy between the number of available bilingual counseling services in the area where I lived and the number of bilingual and monolingual individuals who resided in the same area. I wondered about immigrants' struggles and how they overcame them without professional help. I assumed the struggles undocumented immigrants faced were different than those of documented immigrants. I took into consideration the language barrier, the lack of social support, the difficulty of finding employment, and the ever present racial discrimination toward minority groups; all experienced by a disenfranchised group in the United States. I sought to better understand those struggles so I might be able to offer helpful assistance within my role as a future counseling psychologist.

In my interactions with undocumented immigrants, I also learned to appreciate their sacrifices, hard work, and drive to better themselves in a foreign nation. My experience has been that some undocumented immigrants think of their stay in the United States as temporary, while others view their move as permanent. Some embrace this new culture with admiration, while others reject it completely in an attempt to remain loyal to their native culture. However, the fact that these may be normal aspects of an acculturation process is irrelevant to an undocumented immigrant. The undocumented immigrant can never fully acculturate to U.S. culture because he or she will never be acknowledged as a part of it. In the eyes of U.S. society, the undocumented immigrant will remain invisible because he or she does not have a nine-digit number to prove he or she exists. He or she must forever hide behind the shadows as an illegal alien, avoiding detection for fear of being incarcerated and deported back to his or her country of origin. In conclusion, my opinion was the

added factor of being undocumented added a significant amount of stress to an already stressful acculturation process. In this study, I expected that participants would be undergoing stressful experiences specifically related to their legal status in the United States.

### **Objective of the Project**

The objective of the current study was to understand the experiences unique to undocumented immigrants in the United States. Thus, the following research questions guided this current study:

- Q1     What is it like to be an undocumented Mexican immigrant as determined by undocumented Mexican immigrants' experiences and perceptions?
- Q2     How is an undocumented Mexican immigrant's mental health impacted by his or her experiences in the United States?

### **Participants**

Participants for the current study were recruited in a rural area in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States where Hispanic residents make up approximately 20% of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Consistent with the characteristics of qualitative research in which participants or sites are purposefully selected, the current study utilized purposeful selection of participants from which the most could be learned to better help answer the research questions (Creswell, 2003). To qualify for participation in the current study, each participant met the following criteria: at least 18 years of age, of Mexican origin, an undocumented immigrant, and he or she had lived in the United States for at least six months. In the event participants lived in the United States multiple times, he or she had to have previously lived in the United States for at least six months. The criteria ensured the information collected would provide

information about the experiences of adult Mexican undocumented immigrants. The criterion of being from Mexico was derived from my own interest in studying the Mexican population, as I am also a Mexican native, and in an effort to increase the literature on Mexican immigrants. Being an undocumented immigrant was essential to the current study because the experience of being undocumented was the phenomenon under study.

The number of participants in a qualitative research study typically is determined in the course of the study and based on the study's purpose (Merriam, 2009). A primary factor in determining when collection of information should cease is when saturation (new information no longer provides insight into the phenomenon) is reached (Creswell, 2007). Other factors to consider include the scope of the study, the nature of the topic, the quality of data, study design, and the use of shadowed data (Morse, 2000). When a study is broad in scope, it takes longer to reach saturation. Also, fewer participants are needed when the nature of the topic is clear (Morse, 2000). The current study was both clear and specific to one experience--being undocumented; thus, a small amount of interviews was needed to collect information. The quality of the data or the richness of the description of the phenomenon under study also impacted saturation and was considered during the current study when determining when more interviews were needed (Morse, 2000). Consistent with a phenomenological research design and taking into account that shadowed data or information reported on others' experiences were likely to emerge and be used, the number of participants was previously determined to be between 6 and 10 (Morse, 2000). The total number of participants interviewed in this study was eight.



### **Researcher Role**

In the current study, I as the researcher was the primary instrument of information collection and analysis as is common in qualitative research (Merriam, 2009). Unlike inanimate instruments, a person can process information quickly, clarify his or her understanding with the participants, and check with participants for the accuracy of his or her interpretations (Merriam, 2009). It was necessary for me to provide sufficient information about my role and social location in relation to the participants so the reader can make a decision regarding the transferability of the current study, gain an understanding of the relative power or privilege I hold, as well as obtain an appreciation of the lens through which I viewed the phenomenon and participants (Morrow, 2007). Next, I describe my social location in relation to the participants in the current study.

I am a 31-year-old, doctoral-level, female student living in the Western region of the United States. I was born in northern Mexico and lived in a border town for the first few years of my life. During my childhood in Mexico, crossing the border from Mexico to the United States was a common occurrence because my family and I often visited relatives in a nearby U.S. city. As a child, I understood crossing the border with a visa or passport to be a privilege not everyone around me was granted.

As is common in some Mexican households, my father worked in the United States while my mother and I lived in Mexico. Oftentimes, he was away for months at a time, returned for a few days, and left again. For this reason, my parents and I immigrated to the United States when I was a child where we were able to live together as a family. Although my family and I were documented immigrants, I grew up knowing of relatives who were not documented. Thus, from an early age, I understood the

importance of having a legal status in the country and learned of some of the risks of being undocumented, e.g., being deported back to Mexico.

In the community where I lived and recruited participants, I made myself known to the Hispanic community through a variety of professional presentations. For this reason, I knew some participants personally while others simply recognized me. I also anticipated that as a documented university student, I would be perceived as an outsider to the participants' social group.

## **Procedures**

### **Participant Recruitment**

Participants from a Rocky Mountain region of the United States were recruited through network sampling. I let my own acquaintances know of the current study and recruited participants referred by those acquaintances. Some participants were referred by other participants.

Once I was in contact with interested individuals, I explained to them over the phone that I was a university student conducting a study to learn about the experiences of undocumented immigrants. I asked if they were at least 18 years of age, undocumented, and from Mexico. To those individuals who met the criteria, I explained that the study consisted of meeting face-to-face for an interview that would last no more than 90 minutes. I also let them know if they agreed to be interviewed, I would offer them \$30.00 in cash or a gift card as my way of showing my gratitude toward them for their participation. After individuals agreed to be interviewed, I gave them the choice of having the interview conducted at a public setting of their choice or in their home. The reason for allowing the participants to choose the setting in which to be interviewed was

to give them a sense of power and control over this aspect of the interview and to build rapport with them.

### **Method for Collection of Information**

Collecting information through interviews with participants is consistent with a phenomenological research design (Merriam, 2009). A single, in-depth, semi-structured interview (Merriam, 1998) lasting no more than 90 minutes was conducted with each participant. Each interview was digitally recorded and fully transcribed. Consistent with characteristics of a semi-structured interview in which specific information is sought from each participant, the interview was guided by questions related to the issue being explored--the experience of being an undocumented immigrant (Merriam, 1998).

### **Procedures**

Permission was obtained from each participant by using an Informed Consent Form either in English (see Appendix A) or in Spanish (see Appendix B). The Informed Consent Form was explained in detail, in Spanish based upon the language preference of each participant, and a copy was provided to each. For the purpose of protecting their identities, a verbal consent from the participant was obtained. Participants were made aware of their choice to decline participation at any time. Additionally, they were informed that the \$30.00 compensation would be provided to them upon completion of the interview. Prior to beginning the interview, I asked participants to select a pseudonym as an additional measure to help ensure confidentiality. The pseudonym chosen by each participant was the same name used in consequent reports. I did not keep a list of real names matched to pseudonyms as an additional measure to protect the confidentiality of participants. All documents such as notes and transcripts were

identified by the participant's pseudonym. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by me. The recordings were transferred onto a digital memory storage device, deleted from the digital recorder, and the storage device kept in a locked cabinet. Each recording on the storage device was then destroyed one year after the date of the interview.

Basic demographic information (see Appendices C and D) was collected to obtain a more complete understanding of participants' experiences and background. The basic demographic information included age, gender, marital status, and length of time in the United States. Background information pertaining to family status, education, employment, housing, finances, and language was also collected. Participants were asked the questions on the demographic form and I filled out the form.

During the interview, participants were asked to describe their experiences as undocumented immigrants in the United States. The interview guide (see Appendices E and F) consisted of open-ended questions. The wording of the questions was not predetermined in an effort to allow for new ideas and a more flexible exploration of the topic at hand (Merriam, 1998). Examples of the questions included the following: (a) Please tell me what it has been like for you to live in the United States as an undocumented immigrant and (b) Do you regret your decision of immigrating to the United States? The interview guide (see Appendices E and F) was created and refined through testing of two pilot studies, based on the literature on important factors of acculturation, and through implementing recommendations by members of the dissertation committee (Berry et al., 1987; Williams & Berry, 1991). Next, I briefly describe the two pilot studies that led to the development of the current study.

### **First Pilot Study**

The first pilot study was conducted at a four-year institution in the Rocky Mountain Region in Spring 2009 (see Appendix G for Institutional Review Board [IRB] approval). The focus of the study was to explore the emotional and social adjustment difficulties faced by first-generation, undocumented, Mexican, male immigrants in the United States. Four in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted--each was with an adult male who was born in Mexico. Participants' ages ranged from 25 to 29 years. The questions used to guide the interviews were developed by me based on what I believed to be significant areas to inquire about in trying to understand an undocumented immigrant's life (see Appendix H for interview guide).

Participants were purposefully selected (Merriam, 1998) based on the criteria of being first-generation, undocumented, Mexican, adult male immigrants in order to reflect the purpose of the study. Being of Mexican nationality was a criteria derived from my own interest in studying the Mexican population as well as my goal of increasing the literature on Mexican immigrants. Based on my experience and perception that there are more male undocumented immigrants in the United States than female, I anticipated more availability of male participants. With the intent of maintaining common factors among participants, I opted to develop a criterion of interviewing male rather than female participants.

All participants were recruited in a Rocky Mountain Region whose Hispanic or Latino residents made up approximately 20% of the population based on network sampling through an acquaintance of mine (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). I met those individuals interested in participating at a public setting to explain the nature of the study

(i.e., I was interested in interviewing first-generation, undocumented, Mexican, adult male immigrants) and made them aware of their right to agree or refuse to volunteer. Those individuals who agreed to participate were then given the choice to have the interviews conducted at a public setting of their choice, in their home, or in mine.

Recurring themes were found among participants' experiences and included a deep sense of loneliness, fear of deportation, frustration, perceived discrimination, and substance abuse as a coping skill. Further research was recommended to further explore other coping skills immigrants utilized to handle psychological distress.

### **Second Pilot Study**

The second pilot study was conducted at a higher education institution in the Rocky Mountain Region in Spring 2010. The study was a continuation of the first pilot study but using a narrative inquiry methodology. The same IRB used for the first pilot study (see Appendix G) was used to conduct the second pilot study. Specifically, participants were asked to tell their story as an undocumented immigrant (see Appendix I for interview guide). Interview questions were designed to reflect the purpose of a narrative inquiry study. Two in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted, each with an adult male who was born in Mexico. Participants' ages were in the 40 to 50 range.

One of the participants in this study opted to have the interview with his wife present. This particular interview was different than the rest because the participant's partner was present and because she decided to help the participant answer many of the interview questions. It is noteworthy that the presence of his partner appeared to help the participant since her answers both complemented and enriched his story.

It was noted that the participants provided a richer and more emotive description of their experiences as undocumented immigrants when compared to participants in the first pilot study. Additionally, one of the participants thanked me for interviewing him and said he felt a sense of *desahogo* (i.e., relief) after the interview. Based on his statement, it seemed as though the interview itself was helpful for this participant.

### **Analysis of Information**

To analyze the information collected in the current study, I utilized an approach described by Creswell (2007) and Moustakas (1994--“a simplified version of the Stevick-Claizzi-Keen method” (Creswell, 2007, p. 159). The following steps are commonly used when conducting phenomenological research studies (Creswell, 2007). First, I began by describing my personal experiences with undocumented immigrants in the United States (i.e., the phenomenon). Those experiences were articulated previously under the heading, The Researcher’s Role. This step was taken in an attempt to help me become aware of and set aside those experiences so the focus could then be fully placed on the participants in this research study (Creswell, 2007). This step was continued by keeping a digitally recorded journal in which I recorded my thoughts and reactions to the interviews. It is noteworthy that the collection and analysis of information in a qualitative study is a simultaneous process (Creswell, 2007). Thus, I analyzed the information I collected as I conducted the interviews. By doing so, I was able to determine when saturation of information was reached and when I should stop conducting interviews.

Next, I created a list of significant statements (Creswell, 2007). Significant statements were those statements that described how participants experienced being undocumented in the United States. I listed those statements, a process also known as

horizontalization, while treating each statement as equally valid as the other (Creswell, 2007). I continued to do this until I had developed a list of non-repetitive statements that no longer overlapped. Then, I took those meaningful statements and separated them into larger groups or themes (Creswell, 2007).

After that, I provided a textural description or described what the participants in the study experienced with the phenomenon of being an undocumented immigrant in the United States (Creswell, 2007). In doing so, I included quotes from the interviews to support my descriptions. Later, I provided a structural description or described how the experience of being an undocumented immigrant in the United States happened for the participants. I accomplished this by reflecting on the setting and the context in which the phenomenon (i.e., being an undocumented immigrant in the United States) was experienced by the participants (Creswell, 2007).

Finally, I combined both the textural and the structural descriptions of the phenomenon to create a composite description. This final description is considered to be the essence of the participants' experience as it describes what they experienced and how they experienced it (Creswell, 2007).

Other phenomenological research studies have followed a similar method in the analysis of the information collected (Anderson & Spencer, 2002; Riemen, 1986). One such study was by Riemen (1986) in which she described caring and non-caring experiences of patients and their nurses. Significant statements of interactions experienced as caring and non-caring were presented. From those significant statements, Riemen created meaning statements. Finally, in two paragraphs, she described the essence of the experiences and presented them in tables. A similar method was used in a



study of participants diagnosed with AIDS (Anderson & Spencer, 2002; Creswell, 2007). In this study, Anderson and Spencer (2002) first searched for significant statements, created meaning statements and grouped them into themes, and finally provided an in-depth description of the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2007).

### **Translation Issues**

It was expected that participants in this study would not be fluent in the English language given they were first-generation immigrants in the United States. Therefore, the information was collected in Spanish--the native language of the participants and me. When data in a research study are collected in a language other than English, two common methods are employed to address translation issues (Merriam, 2009). The first is to transcribe the information, in this case the interviews, in the original language and then to translate them verbatim into English. A second strategy is to collect and analyze the information in the original language and then translate the findings into English (Merriam, 2009). In addition to the two strategies mentioned, it is also common to employ a back translation method as a way to check the researcher's translations. When doing a back translation, a bilingual person is asked to translate some of the researcher's English translations back to the original language. A translation is considered more reliable the closer the meaning is to the statement in the original language (Merriam, 2009).

To address translation issues during the analysis stage, I utilized the second strategy mentioned previously. I transcribed the interviews in the original language (i.e., Spanish). With the help of a second analyst (also a bilingual doctoral student), she and I separately analyzed the transcripts in Spanish and derived the themes in English. Once

the second analyst and I came to an agreement about the findings, there was no need for us to translate the findings into English because we had done so as we analyzed the transcripts.

The qualifications of the analyst I hired are described next. She is a female of South American origin and speaks English and Spanish fluently. The analyst is a doctoral level student in a program accredited by the American Psychological Association (APA). Among the many graduate level courses she has taken are graduate level courses in qualitative research. I met the analyst at our university campus and we later connected at an off-campus practicum site.

Documents used in the study such as the Informed Consent (Appendix A), Interview Guide (Appendix E), and Demographic Information Form (Appendix C) were translated from Spanish to English by me. Prior to utilizing them in the current study, some members of the dissertation committee reviewed these forms in English and some reviewed them in Spanish; they provided me with feedback about changes to be made. Spanish versions of all three documents were presented to two undocumented immigrant acquaintances with education levels less than high school equivalents. They provided me with necessary changes to make the documents more understandable to potential participants. The two acquaintances did not participate in the current study.

### **Ethical Considerations**

In any research study, a researcher must consider and address potential ethical issues that could arise during the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Some ethical issues commonly encountered in qualitative research include issues of competence, boundaries and multiple relationships, confidentiality, and informed consent (Haverkamp, 2005). In

this section, the ethical issues that arose throughout the current study are identified, followed by a discussion of how each issue was addressed.

The issue of competence was relevant in the current study as it related to my cultural and clinical competencies. Participants in the current study were considered members of a disadvantaged group because they have little power in the society in which they live, may be considered by some to have low prestige, and may have low socioeconomic status (Adler & Adler, 2001). These types of participants are considered to be reluctant when it comes to responding to interviews (Adler & Adler, 2001). It is recommended that researchers involved in interviewing reluctant participants be nonjudgmental, allow the participant to select the location of the interview, and the researcher must have as many commonalities with the participant as possible (Adler & Adler, 2001). In spite of the fact that there is a scarcity of literature on undocumented immigrants to inform researchers on best practices with them, I was at an advantage given my background. First, I shared some commonalities with the participants in the current study such as being of Mexican origin, speaking Spanish as a native language, and having lived in Mexico. Additionally, I lived among and interacted with undocumented immigrants throughout my life. These characteristics aided in conducting the current study in a culturally sensitive and competent manner.

Given the nature of the current study, it was expected that participants would discuss experiences they might consider unpleasant. When this occurred, my clinical skills proved useful in identifying and responding to signs of distress. One approach used to minimize the likelihood of such incidents was to begin and end an interview by discussing things on a superficial level and allowing the participant to discuss an intense

experience in the middle of the interview. Thus, I allowed each participant enough time to discuss those things that seemed difficult and did not end the interviews while participants were in the middle of sharing an unpleasant or uncomfortable experience. I utilized my clinical skills to determine if by the end of an interview a participant might need further follow-up support. When it appeared a participant needed follow-up support, I referred him or her to a low-cost community mental health agency in the area that provided services in Spanish to all individuals regardless of their legal status.

Although my clinical skills proved useful during some interviews, I did not act as the participants' therapist. Clear boundaries were set with all participants and I made clear that my role was that of a researcher and not a therapist. This was done at the beginning of each interview when I introduced myself and the nature of the current study as well as throughout the interview when necessary. While it was possible a participant might become significantly distressed during an interview, this did not occur.

I anticipated the possibility of finding myself in a multiple relationship situation with a participant. Multiple relationships could occur if I personally knew a participant prior to the interview or if, after interviewing a participant, I ran into him or her in the community. The nature of the current study did not necessitate that my involvement with any participant be prolonged. Therefore, interactions with participants were limited to two to three personal contacts such as setting up and conducting the interview. To guard against misunderstandings or feelings of rejection, I clarified before and after the interview my role as a researcher; I explained that to protect each participant's confidentiality, I would not initiate a conversation with him or her after the interview. It was the case with three participants that I found myself in multiple relationships: one

participant I knew prior to the interview and two others I had contact with following the interviews. In anticipation of this situation, I clarified that the information disclosed during the interview would not be discussed afterwards and that was the case.

The issue of confidentiality was of considerable importance in the current study. As mentioned earlier, participants in the current study are considered to be members of a disadvantaged group given their position in the society in which they live. Additionally, they are a vulnerable population because disclosure of their legal status in the United States could cause them significant harm (e.g., be deported). For these reasons, several measures were taken to safeguard the confidentiality of participants. First, participants were not asked to sign any documents or give their real names. Instead, participants were asked to provide a pseudonym. Therefore, I never possessed a list of participants' real names. Second, participants' contact information, such as their telephone numbers, was destroyed after the study was completed.

Participants in the current study were provided informed consent through which foreseeable risks and benefits of participating as well as how confidentiality would be handled were discussed. It was suggested that informed consent be an ongoing process rather than a one-time event, e.g., giving the participant a form to read (Smythe & Murray, 2000). It is the researcher's responsibility to monitor ongoing consent with the participant (Haverkamp, 2005). Therefore, participants in the current study were provided informed consent prior to and throughout the interviews. A form stipulating how confidentiality would be safeguarded, a participant's right to refuse to participate, researcher contact information, and a list of risks and benefits of participating was

provided to the participant at the beginning of the interview. Additionally, questions or concerns were answered prior to and throughout the interviews.

### **Trustworthiness**

For readers to determine whether a qualitative research study does what it is intended to do and that the findings are accurate and relevant, they will turn to the trustworthiness of the study (Morrow, 2005). Four commonly identified elements of trustworthiness include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Morrow, 2005; Schwandt, 2001). Credibility ensures to the reader that the findings of the study are accurate. Credibility can be achieved through a variety of methods such as: engaging in researcher reflexivity, participant checks, triangulation, or providing thick descriptions (Morrow, 2005). Transferability addresses the extent to which the findings of a study can be generalized to other contexts or populations. A reader can decide if and how the findings of the study might transfer when provided with thick descriptions, sufficient information about the researcher, the context in which the study took place, the processes, the participants in the study, and the relationship between the researcher and each participant (Morrow, 2005). Dependability of a study refers to the consistency in which the study was conducted. To establish the dependability of a study, a researcher may keep an audit trail. Finally, confirmability refers to the assumption that research is subjective and never objective. It is the reader who can confirm whether the findings of the study are adequate. To enhance the confirmability of a study, a researcher will expose the findings of the study as accurately as possible through engaging in many of the same methods used to achieve dependability (Morrow, 2005).

The current study demonstrated trustworthiness by establishing measures of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. To enhance credibility of the current study, I engaged in researcher reflexivity, triangulation, providing thick descriptions, and peer debriefing. I engaged in researcher reflexivity by maintaining a digital self-reflective journal from the beginning to the end of the study (Morrow, 2007). Throughout the course of the study, I recorded my new self-understandings, or experiences, reactions, and emerging awareness of any assumptions or biases that arose for me. Then, I examined them and set them aside (Morrow, 2007).

I did not engage in participant checks because throughout the interview I reflected the information I heard in an effort to make sure I accurately understood the responses. When I misunderstood something, the participants corrected me. Additionally, when it was time to analyze the transcripts, I did not make any interpretations regarding the themes that emerged. The themes were derived from what was said and supported with quotes.

Throughout the data analysis process, I also engaged in triangulation to strengthen the credibility of the current study. I utilized source, researcher, and theory triangulation. I collected information from various sources, i.e., by interviewing several participants. I also involved a second qualified researcher (a graduate student) to analyze the information in the original language or Spanish and derive themes. Finally, I considered multiple theories and perspectives during the analysis and interpretation processes.

Transferability in the current study was established by providing thick descriptions or sufficient information about me, the context in which the study took place, the processes, the participants in the study, and the relationship between each

participant and me. A thick description of my personal and academic backgrounds and reasons for conducting the current study was provided earlier in this chapter under the section titled Researcher Role. The process of how the current study began and developed was also described. Additionally, I provided a description of my interactions with participants as well as my experiences and reactions. I engaged in said methods in an effort to provide the reader with ample information so he or she might be able to determine the extent to which the findings of the current study would be applicable to his or her context.

To establish dependability in the current study, I kept an audit trail. An audit trail is a written record of the decisions or activities made throughout the research process, i.e., anything that might have influenced the collection of information and analysis, how themes emerged, and recordings of my self-reflective digital journal (Morrow, 2007). I periodically asked my advisor, a Professor in Counseling Psychology, to examine my audit trail and provide me with feedback. In turn, any pertinent information such as changes in the research questions and methodology derived from the audit trail are described throughout my data analysis and findings sections. The audit trail method was also used to enhance the confirmability of the current study. Specifically, to increase the probability that the findings avoided as much as possible my biases or values, I engaged in reflexivity by keeping a self-reflective digital journal. By keeping an audit trail, I acquired knowledge of the changes that took place and influences on the process; thus, I was able to take them into account when describing my interpretations and conclusions.



### **Limitations of the Study**

The current study was not without its limitations. The most prominent limitation was the information was collected in a language different from the one in which the results are presented. Given the characteristics of the population in the current study, the information had to be collected in Spanish because first-generation immigrants either only spoke Spanish or spoke very little English. While I am proficient in speaking, reading, and writing in the Spanish language, the possibility exists that the meaning of the participants' experience might have been lost during the translation process. To minimize this possibility, I provide direct quotes in Spanish with a direct translation immediately following. Ultimately, the reader has to rely on my translations and interpretations to understand the experiences of the participants. Measures to ensure accurate interpretations have been described and were taken, yet human error is bound to exist in the current study.

A related limitation is the results are ultimately my interpretations of all participants' experiences. My biases undoubtedly played a role in the interpretations I put forth. The reader will have to take this into consideration when attempting to translate my findings onto other contexts. To minimize the influence of my biases and experiences on the information collection and reporting processes, I attempted to be as transparent as possible to allow the reader to judge the accuracy and relevance of the results I derived from the current study. Describing my role in the current study as well as keeping a digital journal of my experiences and reactions throughout the current study were only two of the ways in which I attempted to be transparent.

## **Summary**

In this chapter, I described a constructionist paradigm that served as the theoretical framework to guide the current study. Additionally, I identified phenomenology as the research design used in the current study. I also provided the methodological steps to be followed throughout the course of the current study. Translation issues and measures to ensure trustworthiness in the current study were also described.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **RESULTS**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter, participants' experiences of being undocumented immigrants in the United States are described to present the phenomenon of being an undocumented Mexican immigrant in the United States.

The following research questions are addressed and answered in the following paragraphs:

- Q1 What is it like to be an undocumented Mexican immigrant as determined by undocumented Mexican immigrants' experiences and perceptions?
- Q2 How is an undocumented Mexican immigrant's mental health impacted by his or her experiences in the United States?

#### **Participant Descriptions**

Eight individuals participated in this study. All participants were from a rural area in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States. A description of each participant and his or her life at the time of the interview is included in the following pages (see Appendix J for demographics table).

#### **Güera**

The interview with Güera took place one early afternoon at a small kitchen table in Güera's mobile home. When the interviewer arrived, she was greeted by Güera and

her tan colored chihuahua dog. Her dog remained in the living room area throughout the interview while barking occasionally.

Güera is a 42-year-old divorced female from Chihuahua, Mexico. She has lived in the United States for a total of 12 years. She has immigrated twice and has lived in the United States for seven years the second time. Although she did not provide details about her first immigration experience, Güera reported that she married a man in Mexico and immigrated to the United States seven years ago. She described her marriage as having been an abusive one for many years, consequently resulting in a divorce. Güera recalls the many fears that surfaced for her while she was in that relationship and difficult situations she encountered. For example, after an incident of physical violence, the police were involved and she and her daughter went to live in a women's shelter for about one month and a half.

Regarding her fluency in the English language, Güera stated that she understands English "a little," does not write it, but can read it "so so." Güera has a college degree in Systems Programming she obtained in Mexico but she has never worked in this field. She also began studying accounting in Mexico but did not complete this degree. Prior to immigrating to the United States, Güera worked in her parents' retail business. At the time of the interview, Güera was unemployed and had been for the previous four months. She previously held a job as a housekeeper at a local hospital. Güera was fired from her employment due to what she described as an unfair termination.

In terms of her family, Güera's relatives live in Mexico with the exception of her teenage daughter who lives with her. She described talking to her relatives who live in Mexico on the phone as constituting the majority of her social interactions. Although she

would like to return to Mexico, she acquired a large debt after her divorce. For this reason, she made a decision to remain in the United States until she can save enough money to pay off a house she and her ex-husband purchased in Mexico while they were married so she can then return to Mexico and live in that house.

### **Sarai**

Sarai is a 33-year-old married female from Zacatecas, Mexico who has lived in the United States for nine years. Her interview took place in her house at the kitchen table on a late Saturday morning. Throughout the interview, the fire alarm beeped every few seconds, indicating a battery was low.

Sarai is unemployed and describes herself as a stay-at-home mother. Prior to immigrating to the United States, Sarai was also a stay-at-home mother. She lives with her husband in a rental house with their three children. Regarding Sarai's fluency in the English language, she stated that she speaks "very little" and reads and writes "a little." Additionally, Sarai holds a sixth grade education.

It is notable that Sarai reported her decision to immigrate to the United States was based on feeling unsafe in Mexico. Her feelings of being unsafe were based on ongoing harassment from her husband's ex-partner with whom he had a child. While she was pregnant with her third child, Sarai reportedly was followed and insulted by the woman. On one occasion, Sarai recalled she found two dead animal heads hanging from her front door. After the last incident, she remembered her mother insisting that Sarai move in with her because she reportedly overheard a man talking to the harassing woman about having to do something to "her" (meaning Sarai). Sarai and her mother were convinced

the woman had hired a man to kill Sarai. At that point, Sarai's husband reportedly decided to bring her and their two children to the United States.

Being undocumented was a common theme in Sarai's family and was the reason why she had only one sister living in the United States. Sarai sadly described one of her sisters' situation in which the sister must remain in Mexico for up to 10 years before she was allowed back in the country. Sarai's sister reportedly was in the process of obtaining a visa but had to exit the country as a result of having entered the country illegally.

### **Esperanza**

Esperanza is a 30-year-old female from Tamaulipas, Mexico who has lived in the United States for almost 12 years. She is married and describes herself as a stay-at-home mother. Maria has four children who all live with her and her husband in a two bedroom apartment.

Esperanza does not speak, read, or write English. Regarding her education level, she has the equivalent of a high school degree. She was smuggled into the United States as a teenager with her aunt who invited her to visit the country. Esperanza then met her future husband and decided to stay. However, her intention had been to return to Mexico and study law. Even now, Esperanza reportedly has conversations with her husband about returning to Mexico so she can go to school.

The year before this interview took place, Esperanza's husband was reportedly detained by immigration for seven months and then released. He is currently awaiting a court hearing to determine if he will be able to remain in the country or if he will be deported. Esperanza clearly stated that if her husband is deported, she too will return to Mexico with their children.

Per her report, being away from her family of origin is very difficult for Esperanza. Esperanza's communication with her family is limited to telephone calls and occasional in-person visits from her mother. She has no family in the country except when her mother visits about once a year. As opposed to the rest of her family, Esperanza's mother has a tourist visa that allows her to visit Esperanza in the United States.

Socially, Esperanza describes herself as being isolated, mainly because she is afraid to go outside. She reportedly limits her outings to taking her children to school, purchasing groceries, and attending medical appointments. Additionally, Esperanza disclosed that her youngest son has autism, her oldest daughter might also have autism, and both are very hyperactive. This was yet another reason why Esperanza avoided social visits with other families as she reportedly was criticized for having hyperactive children.

### **Maria**

Maria is a 47-year-old female from Jalisco, Mexico who has lived in the United States for 16 years. Her interview took place in her home; she and I sat at her kitchen table one early evening. Maria was pleasant, talkative, and presented a cheerful attitude throughout the interview.

Maria immigrated to the United States after her husband had lived in the country for about 10 months. Using her tourist visa, Maria entered the country while her 18-month-old child was smuggled by friends using another child's legal documents. Upon their arrival, Maria and her family lived with her in-laws for some time until she and her husband rented an apartment.

Shortly thereafter, Maria began working as a housekeeper and then became a maintenance worker for the apartment complex she and her family lived in at the time. Maria has now been working as a maintenance worker for about nine years; she reportedly feels satisfied with this arrangement because she is able to learn new things frequently. Maria also is trilingual, being mostly fluent in Spanish, then English, and some in French. She was able to obtain 15 years of education when she lived in Mexico; it was in school in Mexico that she learned English and French. Maria knows how to speak and read English well but knows how to write it “little.” She reported that knowing how to speak English has been very helpful to her. For example, Maria believes being able to communicate with the apartment complex owner was likely the reason he considered her for the job as maintenance worker. While in Mexico, Maria was employed as an Executive Secretary.

Maria is married to Daniel, another participant who is described next; together, they have two children who live with them in the United States. Their oldest son, also undocumented, has one year of high school remaining. Maria and her husband worry about his future. Specifically, their son reportedly does not wish to return to Mexico to pursue a higher education although going to college in the area where he lives is not possible due to his legal status. Maria has in-laws who also live in the United States but all other family relatives live in Mexico.

Maria and her husband live in a mobile home financed under Maria’s sister-in-law’s name. Due to their undocumented status, which impedes them from having a social security number assigned, Maria and her husband are unable to finance their mobile home under their names. Therefore, Maria and her husband make monthly payments on



their home, which will eventually be legally owned by Maria's sister-in-law. Yet, Maria and her husband are reportedly hopeful their legal situation will change in the future and allow them to legally own their home.

### **Daniel**

Daniel is a 49-year-old male from Jalisco, Mexico who has lived in the United States for almost 17 years. Daniel is married to Maria who also participated in the present study. His interview also took place at the kitchen table in their home. Daniel is also one of four participants who entered the United States legally (i.e., with a visa) and then stayed after the permit expired. Unlike other participants in this study, Daniel's intention was to return to Mexico soon after his visit to the United States because he had a business to return to in Mexico.

When he lived in Mexico, Daniel worked as an optometrist; he had hopes of opening his own optic clinic but lacked the necessary equipment. He then decided to gather some money to travel to the United States and work for a limited amount of time with the intention of saving up enough money to purchase the equipment he needed for his shop. Daniel has a sister who lives in the United States. During one of her visits to Mexico, she and Daniel talked and made plans for him to travel to the United States. Daniel reportedly obtained a treaty trader visa that is useful for business owners to trade goods and services in a foreign country. He reported that soon after his arrival to the United States, he realized he would not be able to save enough money in a short amount of time and made the decision to stay in the United States permanently. Daniel explained that without the proper equipment, he could not go forward with his business in Mexico. It was then that his sister helped him obtain false documents so he could begin working.

Daniel then decided to have his wife and child immigrate to the United States; they all currently live together in a mobile home they pay to own. However, their home is not under Daniel or his wife's name but under the name of a family member reportedly because they are unable to purchase a home on credit without a social security number. Since his arrival to the United States, he has had a variety of jobs such as painting homes, landscaping, roofing, installing tile, and other manual labor jobs. At the time of the interview, Daniel was employed holding signs outside of a retail store.

Daniel has an education level equivalent to high school. As far as his English fluency is concerned, he stated that he speaks "very little," reads "some," and does not write "much" English. Daniel reportedly learned English when he was in school and the level of proficiency in the language was limited.

Perhaps what might be most striking about Daniel's situation are the ongoing legal problems he has had in the last few years. Daniel explained that about two years prior to this interview, he learned he had a warrant for his arrest because he reportedly had been charged with identify theft. He further explained that the social security number he made up to use in his jobs turned out to be an existing number. Until the day of the interview, Daniel continues to be involved in legal processes and now is working to prove to a judge that despite the criminal charges against him, he has good moral character.

### **Ricardo**

Ricardo's interview was conducted in the living room of his basement apartment while his wife sat on a sofa and he sat on a chair. Prior to beginning Ricardo's interview, his wife disclosed that she overheard Daniel's interview because she was resting in one of

the bedrooms at Daniel and Maria's home. Ricardo's wife was involved in an accident that resulted in torn knee ligaments and limited mobility of her leg. She added that her husband could provide a more accurate description of the experiences of an undocumented immigrant than had Daniel. However, when I asked Ricardo's wife to provide clarification regarding what she thought was inaccurate about Daniel's account, she declined to provide further details. She was also invited to be interviewed but decided not to participate. Despite her refusal to participate in this study, Ricardo's wife decided to be present during her husband's interview and Ricardo agreed.

Prior to immigrating to the United States, Ricardo worked as a state police officer but reported he had to leave Mexico because his life was at risk. Ricardo explained that local drug trafficking members threatened to kill police officials; therefore, he decided to flee the country in search of safety. He also shared that one of his co-workers had refused to leave Mexico and after Ricardo arrived in the United States, he learned his co-worker had been murdered.

Ricardo is 49-years-old; he immigrated to the United States with a tourist visa and then stayed in the country after his permit expired. Ricardo considers the fact that he entered the country in a legal manner (i.e., with a visa) differentiates him from other immigrants and believes he is not an undocumented immigrant. Rather, he considers himself a documented, yet illegal immigrant because he entered with a visa (i.e., documented) but remains in the country without permission (i.e., illegal).

Ricardo lives with his wife in a basement apartment they rent. They have two children over the age of 18 who currently live in Mexico. Their oldest son graduated from a university in Mexico one year ago. Their youngest daughter is a university

student and Ricardo and his wife pay for her tuition. At the time of the interview, Ricardo and his wife were facing a difficult decision related to her health. Ricardo stated that his wife must undergo knee surgery that might cost them between \$23,000 and \$49,000 dollars. If he and his wife opt out of the surgery, she reportedly might be unable to move her leg at all in future years. Ricardo expressed uncertainty about being able to pay for the surgery because the minimum amount to be paid (i.e., \$23,000 dollars) would constitute about 90% of his yearly income.

With the exception of his sister who lives in the area, Ricardo's family members all live in Mexico. He reportedly visited Mexico about two years ago after his father became ill and was paralyzed in half his body. He expressed sadness at knowing his parents, over the age of 70, had little support to help care for them.

Ricardo stated that he reads, speaks, and writes English; the highest level of education he obtained is the equivalent to a high school degree. He reportedly learned the English language thanks to his father who was a professor and taught Spanish and English. Ricardo reminisced about his childhood when "Americans" visited Mexico to learn Spanish and his father taught them. While in the United States, Ricardo reportedly has been able to take some English courses to refine his English skills.

### **Martin**

The interview with Martin took place in his second floor, one-bedroom apartment in the evening after he arrived home from work. When I arrived at the apartment, his fiancé greeted me and welcomed me into their home. The apartment was quiet although neighbors who left or arrived were occasionally heard going up or down the stairs next to

the front door. Martin and his fiancé decided that she should stay and listen to the interview. Martin, his fiancé, and I sat in the living room area and the recording began.

Martin is a 21-year-old male from Durango, Mexico. He has lived in the United States for one and a half years. Martin is one of four participants in the study who immigrated into the United States with a visa. In other words, he entered the country legally with a work visa, was authorized for up to two months, and decided to stay after it expired. While he had his work visa, Martin worked as a migrant farm worker in a mid-Northern state and then moved to the Rocky Mountain Region to work in construction. Prior to arriving in the United States, Martin worked as an agriculture and livestock worker in Mexico.

Regarding his family status, Martin is currently engaged to be married and lives with his fiancé in a leased apartment. He does not have children and most of his family, including his parents and siblings, live in Mexico. Martin has relatives such as cousins, aunts, and uncles who live in the United States. Yet, he has little contact with them, which is limited to talking to them via Facebook or on the telephone. Martin does not speak, read, or write English but stated that he currently attends English night classes offered at a local university. Such classes are offered to community members and are not limited to enrolled university students. His highest level of education obtained is equivalent to a ninth grade education.

Throughout the interview, Martin appeared to have a mostly hopeful and positive attitude about his experiences as an undocumented immigrant. However, a few days after the interview, I ran into Martin while running errands. I noted that Martin appeared much more worried after finding out that Luis, another participant, was reportedly

detained by the police while driving and was at risk of being deported. During this brief encounter, Martin reported that during the interview, he felt calm about his situation (i.e., being an undocumented immigrant) but after Luis' incident, he felt much more aware of the potential for being detained and deported. Martin was also present during Luis' interview. He stated during this brief encounter and after having listened to Luis' interview, he was more aware of the risks of being undocumented--risks he reportedly was not aware of before.

### **Luis**

Luis was the last participant in this study to be interviewed. He was recruited through his co-worker, Martin, with whom he works in the construction field. The interview with Luis took place in my vehicle just outside of Luis' home one evening after Luis arrived home from work. Luis declined to have the interview conducted in his home or any other place. Martin accompanied Luis at Luis's request and was present throughout the interview. Martin sat quietly in the back seat while Luis was in the front passenger seat. The recorder was placed on top of the center console located between the driver and passenger's seats. The evening was windy and rainy and Martin opened the rear window from time to time to allow outside air to circulate.

Luis is a 27-year-old male from Jalisco, Mexico and has lived in the United States for eight years. He has worked in construction for the last four years doing concrete work, framing, and now building houses. Prior to obtaining a job in construction, Luis worked in a greenhouse planting tomatoes.

When he lived in Mexico, Luis attended school and achieved the equivalent of a 12<sup>th</sup> grade education. Upon his arrival in the United States, Luis lived with distant

relatives whom he considers acquaintances and hesitates to call family. For three years, he lived with said relatives and their children who did not speak Spanish. Luis recalled spending time with the children and helping them with their homework while they taught him English and other things relevant to the United States culture. In this manner, Luis reportedly learned to speak, read, and write English.

Luis currently rents a house and lives alone. In terms of his family status, Luis is unmarried and does not have children. He reported to being romantically involved with a South American female who lives in a nearby city approximately one hour away from his home. He denied having intentions to marry or have children in the near future. Luis's relatives live in Mexico and he has not seen them in eight years. One of his sisters recently immigrated to the United States but lives in a different state. Luis reported that he stays in contact with his family through talking to them via the telephone two to three times weekly.

A few days after Luis's interview, I learned from Martin, another participant, that Luis had been detained by police while driving. Luis reportedly was incarcerated and his co-workers were making efforts to collect money to pay a bail bond and prevent his deportation.

### **Emerging Themes**

In the next section, themes that emerged across participants in this study are presented. To describe the phenomenon of what it is like to be an undocumented Mexican immigrant in the United States, direct quotes and examples are provided for each theme.

## **Low Wages**

Four participants reported that the wages an undocumented Mexican immigrant receives are low. Sarai, for example, reported knowing about other undocumented immigrants who were paid minimum wage in cash so the actual wages paid to a worker were never recorded in writing. This way, she added, there was no way to prove a worker received little pay.

Esperanza recalled a time when, after her husband was detained by immigration, she took a job because she was falling behind on rent. Her job consisted of cleaning 8 to 12 buildings daily; in return, she was compensated \$300.00 dollars every two weeks or \$600.00 dollars monthly for working every single day. She stated, “No me pagaba mucho porque...por ser indocumentada. Ganaba trescientos a la quincena” (*She did not pay me much because...for being undocumented. I earned \$300 biweekly*).

Ricardo also described ways in which a previous employer paid very low wages to construction workers. Specifically, Ricardo explained that his co-workers had differing level jobs and the difference was in the amount of work and the type of work involved. Although some workers worked all job levels, they were compensated for only some levels and not others or they were compensated for all levels but the number of hours worked was reduced.

## **Guilt**

Feelings of guilt were reported by two of the participants--Esperanza and Sarai. Such feelings of guilt were related to the missed opportunities and challenges faced by their children as a result of having been brought to the United States and remaining here undocumented. Esperanza, for example, reported that her oldest daughter often asks that



her mother purchase a home with a big backyard and a pool and Esperanza exclaims, “Sufren ellos por los...a causa de sus papas” (*They suffer due to the...because of their parents*). Although Sarai and her family rent a house with a back yard, she experiences guilt over her children’s academic future. Specifically, Sarai is aware that once her oldest daughters graduate from high school, they will not be able to attend college because of their immigration status. Sarai’s belief is “les truncamos sus sueños” (*we truncated their dreams*).

### **Fear of Driving**

Five out of the eight participants reported either anxiety in the form of fear or feelings of uncertainty when it came to driving a vehicle. Specifically, all participants feared that if they were to get pulled over by police, they might end up in an immigration office and eventually deported. While all participants reported they drove their vehicles, Esperanza and Sarai clearly stated they drove only when absolutely necessary. Sarai described the fear she experiences when she must drive: “Tiene uno miedo de que lo paren de que uno no trai lo que se necesita para manejar” (*One is afraid of being pulled over for not having what is needed to drive [a driver’s license]*). Sadly, Esperanza limits her outings to going grocery shopping, taking her kids to and from school, and going to medical appointments: “Prefiero estar aqui encerrada que algo me llegue a pasar por fuera” (*I would rather be here shut in than for something to happen to me outside*).

Ricardo and Daniel were two participants who described making efforts daily to ensure they will not be pulled over, e.g., checking their vehicles each time they drive to make sure no lights are out or there are no defects that could cause a police officer to pull them over. Ricardo stated,

Cuando manejes revisar bien tu carro, luces, todo, que no tengan ningún motivo para pararte. Manejar bien, que no tengan ningún motivo para pararte (*When you drive, to check your car well, the lights, everything so they will not have any reason to pull you over. Drive well, so they will not have any reason to pull you over*).

### **Financial Difficulties**

While all participants in this study struggled financially, only four of them openly reported feeling dissatisfied with their current financial situations. For example, Esperanza and Güera reported they struggled to make ends meet and commented that their house furniture were hand-me-downs as opposed to having been purchased new. Esperanza stated,

*Y no creas que todo lo que tenemos aquí lo hemos comprado, lo hemos agarrado de la basura. Ya ves que las fresas ponen afuera a veces muebles gratis y todo eso. (And do not think that we have purchased everything we have here. We have gotten them from the garbage. You know that the preppy girls sometimes put free furniture and all that stuff outside).*

Esperanza and her family reportedly go to a local donation center after business hours and look through the clothes left outside, supposedly because they will not be used in the donation center.

Esperanza, Maria, and Daniel had a unique situation; their financial struggles were also impacted by the fact that Esperanza and Maria's husbands, Daniel in Maria's case, were at one point detained by immigration officials. They had to hire attorneys and pay bail bonds to for their husbands to be released. The financial toll such expenses took on these families was reportedly tremendous considering Esperanza, for example, depends only on her husband's income and neither family reportedly had any savings to pay for the bonds or attorneys. Additionally, asking for loans or using a credit card were not options for either family due to their undocumented status. While Ricardo did not

directly express dissatisfaction with his current financial situation, he reported not having enough money to pay for his wife's surgery and send his daughter tuition money at the same time. In the same manner, Sarai reportedly refused to ask for government assistance for her youngest son who is a U.S. citizen and might qualify for assistance because she believes her husband's salary should be enough: "Yo no pido por él porque yo digo que con el sueldo alcanzamos, no muy bien pero alcanzamos" (*I do not request assistance for him because I say that we can get by with the salary, not well enough but we can get by*). It appeared then that most participants struggled financially even if they did not easily admit it.

### **Sense of Loss**

**Social isolation.** Among all eight participants was a sense of social isolation or at least a limited amount of socialization within their respective communities. Without their immediate families in the United States, all participants relied on telephone conversations to maintain contact with them. Outside of these telephone contacts, Esperanza, Sarai, and Güera did not socialize much with others.

Esperanza reportedly preferred to stay at home and not make friends so as to avoid having to visit them and running the risk of being pulled over by police on the way to see them:

No tengo amistades. No, nomas, pos nomas mi esposo porque trabaja. 'Sabes que? me invitan a una fiesta [he says]. Vamos! Pero es que no conozco [she replies] pues vamos pa' que empieces a conocer [he answers]. 'Ay!' le digo, 'no y no' y pos no. Realmente si, vamos pero nomas me estoy así, o sea no. Me saludan y todo eso y me hacen platica pero, no, ya de ahí ya no les vuelvo a hablar, no las vuelvo a buscar ni nada (*I do not have friends. No, only, well only my husband does because he works. "You know what? I am being invited to a party. Let's go!" [he says] "But I do not know anyone" [she replies]. "Well let's go so you can start getting to know people" [he answers]. "Oh no!" I tell him, "no and no" and well no. We really do go but I am just like that. They say hello*

*to me and all that and they talk to me but, no, after that I do not talk to them again, I don't seek them out or anything).*

When she lived in Mexico, Esperanza reportedly had a social network comprised mostly of her schoolmates and family.

Ricardo, on the other hand, reported that he would like to socialize more just as he did when he lived in Mexico. However, he believes a certain rivalry grows between co-workers due to the scarcity of employment opportunities among undocumented immigrants. For that reason, Ricardo limits his socialization to his immediate family (i.e., two sisters and in-laws) and his wife.

For Maria, some factors that influenced her limited social network included it was difficult to go out and have a drink without a valid driver's license. She feared that if she or someone from her social group was pulled over, the consequences would be worse than for someone who has a driver's license. Maria also added that even though she has been able to meet people through her job because she can speak English, other undocumented immigrants might find this to be a barrier when attempting to socialize.

Daniel and Luis similarly described their social life as limited; certain social scenes were avoided by them either because they needed a valid form of identification to enter certain places such as bars or they needed a driver's license in case they were pulled over at night and eventually deported. Daniel made the following statement about himself and his wife:

*No vamos a bailes, no salimos de noche. Por qué? Por el mismo miedo. El miedo, sí, de que nos detengan en la calle. Ya en estas fechas, si nos detiene la policía y como no traes licencia, corte y corte y vámonos, arrestado y todo eso (*We do not go dancing, we do not go out at night. Why? Because of the fear. Yes, the fear of being pulled over on the street. Nowadays if the police pulls us over and since you do not have a license, it is court and court and let's go, arrested and all of that*).*

**Separation from family of origin.** As a result of living in the United States without proper authorization to travel in and out of the country, all of the participants in the study experienced a separation from their families of origin. All participants in this study relied heavily on the telephone and some on other forms of technology such as Facebook as a means of maintaining communication with their relatives. Martin described the separation as a “sacrificio” he has to make and that his family understands. Yet, participants like Ricardo, Luis, Daniel, Güera, Esperanza, Maria, and Sarai who have been in the U.S. for several years appeared to resent the distance separating them from their families of origin and felt desperate when a loved one was in need and they were unable to make a trip to see or help them in Mexico.

Güera described a sense of loneliness as a result of being away from her family of origin. She also concerned herself with the loss of family cohesiveness because both she and her daughter have spent the last few years away from the family. Another concern stemming from being away from her family of origin is that cultural traditions and values are in jeopardy of being lost.

Luis described a certain feeling of disappointment upon learning there is a high price to pay for living in the United States:

Sufres mucho. Yo, como digo, yo vivo solo. Yo tengo viviendo solo sin hermanos, mi mama, toda mi familia está en México (*You suffer a lot. Me, like I said, I live alone. I have lived alone without my siblings, my mother. All of my family is in Mexico*).

Luis reported feeling lonely without his family and stated it was difficult to know that a relative is ill but he does not have the option to travel and see him or her. Luis has not seen his mother or siblings for eight years.

**Cultural mourning.** Three of the eight participants reported that learning about and adjusting to U.S. culture had been particularly difficult. Ricardo described his experience of adjusting to U.S. culture as deracinating:

*Sales de tu tierra a un lugar desconocido con gente diferente que piensan diferente, que son diferentes. No la mayoría pero si algunos no te ven bien, te discriminan. Entonces eso te hace sentir mal. A eso le llaman desarraigo, lo arrancan a uno de sus raíces. Es otra cultura, es otra comida, otro país, es otro clima (You leave your land toward an unknown place with different people who think differently, who are different. No most of them but some of them do not look at you nicely, they discriminate you. So then that makes you feel bad. That is what some call deracination; they uproot one from one's roots. It is another culture, another food, another country, another weather).*

For Güera and Sarai, adjusting to the change in the taste of food had been surprisingly difficult. Another adjustment Sarai felt unprepared for was that in U.S. culture, owning a vehicle and driving were seen as necessities, whereas in the place where she lived in Mexico it was not a necessity. Therefore, she had difficulty with transportation until she learned to drive.

Güera found an acculturation gap between her teenager and herself, which created conflict between the two. For example, Güera's perception was that minors are protected very much in U.S. culture to the point that children seem to take advantage of that protection to somehow manipulate their parents into giving in to their requests, situations Güera reportedly had witnessed.

**Feeling of disillusionment.** Another common theme among five of the eight participants was a sense of disillusionment upon their arrival to the United States. For participants like Sarai, Güera, Martin, Daniel, and Luis, life in the United States was something to look forward to based on stories they heard from others who traveled back and forth between the United States and Mexico. These undocumented Mexican

immigrants believed in what is known as the American Dream but were sadly surprised when they learned their legal status would become an immense barrier to success in the United States. Hence, they seemed to experience the loss of a dream.

Sarai described her high hopes and disillusionment:

Pues al principio viene uno con ilusión por todo lo que oye. Que es una nueva vida, algo mejor para sus hijos. Uno viene contento pero cuando uno llega uno aquí realmente se da cuenta que como lo escuchaba no es, que es todo diferente a como uno lo escuchaba (*Well at first one comes with a sense of hope because of everything one hears. That it's a new life, something better for your children. One comes here happy but when one arrives here one truly realizes that it is not how one heard about it, that everything is different from the way one heard it was*).

Despite his attempts to prepare himself and find out what life was truly like in the United States and challenges that might present themselves for Mexican immigrants, Martin too felt a sense of disillusionment when he arrived in the United States: “Pero ya estando aca te das cuenta de que no todo es tan fácil como miras a tus compañeros” (*But once you are here you realize that not everything is as easy as it seemed for your friends*). For example, Martin reportedly was unprepared because he did not speak English even though his friends who traveled from the United States to Mexico reportedly told him that speaking English was not necessary because many people in the United States spoke Spanish.

Güera and Daniel’s sense of disillusionment was similar; they seemingly expected to earn money quickly because jobs reportedly paid more in the United States. Daniel felt surprised to learn that although jobs paid more, the cost of living was also much higher than it was when he lived in Mexico. Consequently, he did not save up as much money as he had hoped and return to Mexico to pursue his optic business.

Güera also reported not having made as much money as she had hoped and unhappily “lost” time and never witnessed important family events:

No he logrado lo que yo estaba prácticamente enfocada a hacer, este, el sueño americano desapareció. No hay tal sueño. No es como la gente dice que aquí en Estados Unidos se barrían los dólares con una escoba; eso no es cierto (*I have not yet done what I was basically focused to do, um, the American dream disappeared. There is no such dream. It is not like people say that here in the United States you swept up dollars with a broom; that is not true*).

### **Limited Access to Employment Opportunities**

Of the eight participants in this study, six of them reported having limited access to employment opportunities or to better employment positions due to their undocumented status. For example, Ricardo would like to have a job that better matches his skills and experience or even go to school and better prepare himself. However, obtaining a better job or going to school is not possible because he is undocumented:

Yo se que yo puedo hacer más. Puedo tener un mejor trabajo precisamente por lo que puedo hacer. O sea, yo no vine a este país no sabiendo inglés. Yo puedo hablar, leer, y escribir inglés. Hay gente que puede hablar un 80 o 90 por ciento, no saben ni escribir ni leer. Entonces yo lo poco que se lo puedo hablar y lo puedo escribir. Entonces eso te ayuda más. Desgraciadamente muchas de las personas que venimos aquí a los Estados Unidos, no pasaron de tercero o cuarto año de primaria. Entonces la escolaridad es muy baja para tener un trabajo en una oficina o en algún otro puesto de más importancia. No tienen la capacidad. Si tienen las ganas y el deseo pero posiblemente no tengan la capacidad. Entonces, yo se que yo puedo tener un trabajo mejor pero realmente no lo puedo tener (*I know I can do more. I can have a better job precisely because of what I can do. I mean, I did not come to this country not knowing English. I can speak, read, and write English. There are people who can speak about 80 or 90 percent, they do not know how to write or read it. So then, the little that I know, I can speak and write it for you. So then, that helps one more. Unfortunately many of the people who come here to the United States did not go past third or fourth grade. So then, the education level is very low to have a job in an office or in some other position of more importance. They do not have the competency. They have the desire and the wish but they possibly do not have the competency. So then, I know I can have a better job but in reality I cannot have it*).



Esperanza, Luis, and Martin would like to be able to apply to higher paying or less physically demanding jobs but are unable to do so because they lack legal authorization to work in the United States.

### **Language as a Barrier**

Participants in this study all originated from Mexico where the primary language spoken is Spanish. Six of the eight participants reported that not speaking the English language has posed as a barrier in differing areas of their lives. For example, Esperanza has encountered difficulty in her jobs and seeking medical services since she is unable to understand what is being said. Sarai and Güera also reported difficulty communicating with others such as in schools or with agencies where they sought assistance (e.g., police, medical clinics). Daniel and Martin have experienced that not knowing the English language has made finding employment difficult. Maria, Ricardo, and Daniel also reported that their social life is limited when they are not able to speak the mainstream language.

### **Discrimination**

The topic of discrimination was discussed with all participants as it was one of the topics on the Interview Guide (see Appendix F) and four of the eight openly admitted to having directly experienced some form of discrimination. Sarai, Esperanza, and Güera told stories about feeling overlooked in medical settings while waiting for services. They also recounted several times when attendants at pharmacy stores were rude to them or they were followed around in a retail store as if one of them was going to shoplift.

Sarai recalled a time when neighbors called her family “Mexican immigrants.” Maria did not believe she had been discriminated against because her physical

appearance, in her opinion, is not that of a common Mexican. She believes her husband's physical appearance matches that of a stereotypical Mexican (i.e., tanned skin color, short in height, somewhat robust, and dark hair) and stated that he has been the target of discrimination in part due to his physical appearance but also because he does not speak English. Daniel, however, did not disclose this information during his interview.

Esperanza recalled having a job where she was frequently harassed by a supervisor because of her physical appearance such as being called "flaca" and being made fun of for being so thin "te vas a desaparecer." Sadly, however, Esperanza also remembers being discriminated against by mental health professionals. She described a situation when she was told by her daughter's medical provider that she was hyperactive and was prescribed medication. For this reason, Esperanza reportedly sought the services of a psychologist to help understand her daughter's diagnosis and why she was being medicated. Esperanza said the mental health professional upon meeting her accused Esperanza of making up her daughter's symptoms with the intention of reaping legal benefits for her husband who was going through immigration problems. As of the date of the interview, Esperanza is still unclear why her daughter is medicated and the nature of her diagnosis.

Güera also remembered having had an experience with a supervisor who would snap her fingers at Güera when asked to do something. Luis reported feeling uncomfortable every time a co-worker asked him if he was "legal." Luis's assumption is that some of his co-workers profile him as being Hispanic and question his legal status.

## **Impact on Children**

Four of the eight participants reported that their own undocumented status impacted their children whether or not their children were also undocumented. Knowing about the impact consequently caused the participants to suffer. The first example of this impact was reflected by Ricardo whose children are undocumented. He was tired of waiting for immigration reform that would allow children to go to college so he decided to send his children back to Mexico so they could obtain a higher education. Ricardo states the separation has definitely taken a toll on the family but is convinced it was the best decision. In the meantime, Ricardo and his wife struggle to support themselves here and help pay for their daughter's education in Mexico. His oldest son graduated from a university about one year ago and they are happy their daughter will complete her studies in the next few years.

Neither Daniel nor Maria has a legal status in the United States, which means they are unable to provide adequate medical benefits for themselves or their children. Additionally, their oldest son is also undocumented; but because he has grown according to U.S. culture, he currently refuses to go to Mexico to study at a university. Daniel and Maria worry about their son's future and employment opportunities if he cannot pursue a higher education. Similarly, Sarai is aware that her two oldest daughters are undocumented and is concerned that although they are good students and motivated to study, they may become less hopeful about their academic future once they realize they cannot attend college after high school.

### **Childrearing Difficulties**

Ricardo and Güera expressed concern about the difference in childrearing practices in the United States when compared to those in Mexico. Although no specific examples were given about differences, both reported that children being raised in the United States threaten their parents with calling the police if a parent was to physically hit them. Güera recalls an instance when her daughter told her this and the “bofetada al corazon” (*a slap in the heart*) she felt after hearing her daughter threaten her:

Muchos de los hijos este es lo primero que hacen. Este, acusar a los padres de decir que ‘si no me dejas, si no me das,’ el chantaje ‘te voy a acusar de que tú me estas maltratando.’ Me ha dicho, ‘no te vayas a atrever a tocarme porque yo si te denuncio’...una bofetada en el corazón (*It is the first thing many of the children do. Um, accuse the parents by saying that “if you don’t let me, if you don’t give me” the blackmail “I am going to accuse you of abusing me.” She has told me, “Don’t you dare touch me because I will report you”...a slap in the heart.*)

### **Regret of Immigrating**

After disclosing positive and challenging experiences, participants were then asked to disclose if they regretted the decision they made to immigrate to the United States. Of the eight participants in this study, four participants reported feeling regretful at least at times, while the other four did not express feelings of regret but rather saw more advantages to their immigration. For example, Sarai expressed indecisiveness about feelings of regret. At times, she does regret having immigrated because she does not feel like an important part of U.S. society. She explained,

A veces si, a veces no. A veces si por, por lo que le digo, por dejar a mi mama porque uno sabe que aquí, prácticamente uno se siente que no vale nada. No es importante uno para este país por lo mismo que no tiene. Si, si se siente uno asi (*Sometimes yes and sometimes no. Sometimes yes because of, of what I told you, because of leaving my mother because one knows that here, one feels that they are basically not worth anything. One is not important to this country because of not having [papers]. Yes, one does feel that way.*)

However, if ever faced with the decision to have to return to Mexico, she reportedly would feel sad and scared due to the ongoing violence she has heard is happening in Mexico at the time. She would much prefer to continue experiencing feelings of rejection and worthlessness:

Por eso digo que aquí ahorita tiene uno miedo y no me importa. Prefiero miradas feas, sentirme muy poquita cosa ante la demás gente, a que me lleguen a echar a mi país y llegar a que me llegue a pasar algo o a sus hijos de uno. Está muy feo ahorita para allá. Saben que la gente tiene dinero, entra y roba. Muchas injusticias se están viendo allá (*That's why I say that here right now one is afraid. And I do not care, I prefer nasty looks, feeling worthless next to others, than for them to throw me back to my country and something to happen to me or one's kids. It is very bad over there right now. They know that people have money, they go in and rob. There are many injustices that are happening over there*).

During those times when he is jobless, misses his family, the food, the places he visited, or his friends, Ricardo feels regret of having immigrated to the United States. He reminds himself that he earns more money than he earned in Mexico and has his basic needs met, yet he is suffering emotionally:

Cuando se le acaba a uno el trabajo, cuando extraña uno mucho su familia, la comida, los lugares que iba a visitar, los amigos. Entonces uno dice, 'bueno aquí estoy ganando más o menos bien, puedo sobrevivir, no me falta nada' pero emocional no está uno bien. (*When one is out of work, when one misses his family very much, the food, the places that one visited, the friends. Then one says, "well, I am making money more or less, I can survive, I lack nothing" but emotionally one is not okay*).

### **Limitations Exclusive to Undocumented Immigrants**

**No higher education opportunities.** Three out of eight participants expressed a desire to pursue a higher education. Esperanza, for example, had hopes of studying law before she immigrated to the United States. During her interview, she expressed feeling hopeful about being able to go back to school if she ever returned to Mexico. It seemed

as though Esperanza's only hope of pursuing a higher education was to go back to Mexico.

Martin is taking English classes at a local college that offers them to non-students. His hope is to be able to study a career at a university. When asked if this was something he wanted to do in the United States, he stated he would but was unsure if he would have to have legal documentation to be admitted as a student. Apparently, Martin was not aware of the barrier for undocumented students throughout the United States when it comes to pursuing a higher education.

Ricardo talked about wanting to better himself by learning more English and pursuing a higher education perhaps to become a mechanic, a technician, or a doctor but he recognized the barriers involved for him due to his immigration status:

*Sí, tengo la capacidad, tengo las habilidades pero no tengo el derecho verdad? Esa es la palabra ideal, no tengo el derecho para obtener un mejor trabajo. Yo quisiera ir a la escuela y seguirme preparando, yo creo que todas las personas tenemos las ambiciones y yo quisiera seguir estudiando, yo quisiera ser un mecánico, un técnico, un doctor, pero no puedo. Primera, porque no tengo los papeles. Segunda, porque no tendría la ayuda y es muy caro, es muy caro, no tenemos derecho a ayuda tampoco (Yes, I have the competency, I have the skills but I do not have the right, correct? That's the ideal word, I do not have the right to obtain a better job. I would like to go to school and continue improving myself, I think all persons have those ambitions and I would like to go back to school. I would like to be a mechanic, a technician, a doctor, but I cannot. First, because I do not have papers. Second, because I would obtain the aid and it is very expensive, it is very expensive, we do not have the right to receive aid either).*

**Limited housing options.** Participants in the study identified another problem that comes with not being documented with legal authorization to live in the United States--not having a valid social security number that might allow such immigrants to establish credit and obtain a driver's license among other things. For seven out of eight participants, the place where they lived was largely influenced by their immigration

status. As was discussed previously, Daniel and Maria live in a home being financed under someone else's name because they are unable to take out a mortgage without a valid social security number. So each month they are hopeful their relative will honor their verbal agreement to allow them to own the mobile home once it is paid off.

Although Luis, Martin, and Ricardo have places to live, they are not completely satisfied with their housing arrangements. They reportedly are aware their legal status largely dictates their housing options. Because they do not have a social security number, a background check cannot be performed as is required in most places. Additionally, their low wages do not permit them to own or rent a larger or more suitable place to live. Ricardo explains,

Es una situación difícil porque la mayoría de las personas no tenemos, no ganamos un sueldo adecuado como para poder comprar una vivienda, eso es de entrada. En segunda, si no tienes número de seguro no tienes derecho a comprar una vivienda. Si la puedes comprar por cualquier otro tipo de manejo, en algún tiempo cuando hay problemas económicos no tienes la capacidad para refinanciar, pedir un préstamo, o hacer cualquier cosa, precisamente porque no tienes un numero (*It is a tough situation because, for starters, most of us do not have, do not earn an adequate salary to be able to purchase a home. Secondly, if you do not have a social security number you do not have the right to purchase a home. If you can purchase it through some other means, if there is ever a time where financial problems come up you do not have the capability of refinancing, asking for a loan, or do anything else, precisely because you do not have a number*).

**Limited access to healthcare.** For five of the eight participants, accessing healthcare in the United States has been problematic throughout the years. Participants in this study do not have health insurance primarily because they do not own valid social security numbers. Without valid social security numbers, participants reportedly cannot access low cost health care services or benefits such as those offered by Medicaid.

Esperanza and Sarai both experienced situations in which they or their children needed medical services but communication with medical staff was difficult due to the

language barrier. Additionally, Sarai did not have transportation, which frequently made her late to her scheduled appointments as she had to either walk or learn to use public transportation. For some of their children, Sarai and Esperanza are grateful to have Medicaid benefits that grant them access to the local low-cost medical clinic but are faced with having to pay full price if either of them requires medical services. Such was the case with Sarai when she developed an infection after having a miscarriage. She reportedly found herself having to go to more than one medical clinic until she found one that would treat her without insurance. Sarai tells that she received a shot to treat her infection but shortly thereafter noticed what seemed like hives. Returning to the medical clinic was not an option for her and her husband at the time because neither one could gather enough money to pay for another trip to the medical clinic. The next day, a family relative was able to loan her husband the money to take Sarai back to the clinic and be treated.

### **Invisibility**

Among some participants emerged a theme of either feeling invisible in U.S. society or of making attempts to become as invisible as possible so as to not draw attention to themselves. The latter reportedly was done with the intention of not being identified as undocumented Mexican immigrants lest police or immigration officers spot them. Four of the eight participants in this study shared experiences related to their invisibility.

Esperanza says that when she has to drive, she takes back roads and avoids any major streets so as to avoid running into police officers who might pull her over. Additionally, if she hears a rumor about a raid, she locks herself up with her children in a



bedroom in her apartment and avoids going outside. Sarai's feelings of invisibility are mostly related to her own sense of feeling unimportant and invisible in U.S. culture.

Ricardo, on the other hand, describes his experience of being an undocumented immigrant as "living in the shadows." He stated,

Literalmente se vive como una sombra en los Estados Unidos, vives en el anonimato todo el tiempo porque desgraciadamente la mayoría de los lugares no puedes tener un trabajo con tu nombre, con tus fechas de nacimiento, tus datos porque no los vas a lograr, no vas a tener un trabajo. Entonces tienes que desde inventarte un número de seguro social, conseguirte una tarjeta residencia o de ciudadanía como pruebas de estatus para poder aplicar por un trabajo (*One literally lives like a shadow in the United States. You live in anonymity the whole time because, unfortunately, in most places you cannot have a job with your name, with your birth date, your personal information because you will not get it, you will not get a job. So then, you have to go from making up a social security number, get yourself a residency card or citizenship as proof that you have the status to be able to apply for a job*).

Daniel, like Ricardo, also attempts to be invisible, especially when he drives:

Uno es invisible, se trata de pasar invisible. Cómo? De no violar las reglas de vialidad, hacer stops, marcar flechas, que no se te funda ningún foco del carro, menos de un faro, de los frontales. Entonces, estar al cien con el carro y manejar lo más prudente posible (*One is invisible, one tries to pass on as invisible. How? By no violating traffic laws, making stops, signaling, making sure no light in your car is out, especially not a headlight. Then, being at a hundred percent with the car and driving as cautiously as possible*).

Additionally, he describes his manner of driving as defensive, carefully watching other cars so as to avoid an accident because as Daniel says,

Porque si te chocan, ya llega la policía, llega, no traes licencia, dame tu registración, aseguranza, y driver license (*Because if they crash into you, the police will arrive, you do not have a license, 'give me your registration, insurance, and driver's license*).

### **Legal Problems**

The much feared deportation back to Mexico is a very real threat and not merely an unfounded fear for undocumented Mexican immigrants. Three of the participants were

experiencing legal problems related to immigration when they were interviewed. Shortly after the interview, a fourth participant, Luis, was learned to have become legally involved with immigration and was at risk of being deported. All participants in this study expressed at one point or another a sense of fear or worry, such as in driving without a driver's license, because, ultimately, they ran the risk of being detained by immigration and deported back to Mexico.

Esperanza experienced having her husband detained by immigration for seven months. The cost of hiring attorneys and paying bail bonds were reportedly very high; at the time of the interview, they were still paying off those debts, which made them fall behind on other payments. Daniel and Maria also experienced the financial burden and emotional toll as a result of Daniel's detainment some time ago. They too were still dealing with court dates and payments to help settle Daniel's legal problems.

### **Psychological Impact**

**Fear.** All participants in this study reported feeling "miedo" (i.e., fear) or "preocupacion" (i.e., worry) of being pulled over by police or eventually being detained by immigration officers and deported back to Mexico. For Luis, fear and worry were "always" present:

*Si, siempre hay preocupaci3n, siempre tienes preocupaci3n, siempre....Cuando te para un policia siempre tienes preocupaci3n, de que te va a pedir, que te va a hacer, que preguntas te va a hacer (Yes, there is always a worry, you are always worried, always.... When a police officer pulls you over there is always concern about what he is going to ask for, what he is going to do to you, what questions he is going to ask).*

He added that the fear toward police would likely be greater for those undocumented immigrants who do not speak English:

Y más con la gente que no habla inglés. Gracias yo gracias a Dios aprendí inglés y se leer inglés, y hablo inglés, pero, siempre tienes ese, el miedo de tu ‘identificación que?’ o ‘a donde vas?’ El miedo de que si te toca alguien, un policía mala onda, o porque los policías pueden hacer lo que ellos quieren en realidad (*Even more so with the people who do not speak English. Thankfully I, thank God I learned English and I can read English, and I can speak English. But you always have that fear of “what of your identification card?” Or “where are you going?” The fear of what if you get someone, a mean cop? Because in reality the police officers can do whatever they want*).

In these quotes, Luis acknowledged his vulnerability and belief that his future as an immigrant in the United States depended, to some extent, on the authority figure who holds the power to expose him.

Of the eight participants in this study, Esperanza was the participant whose fear appeared to impact most areas of her life. She talked about avoiding social interactions that might lead to social visits with the end goal of avoiding exposing herself by driving or leaving her home. She limited her outings to mostly necessities such as taking her children to school, picking them up, going grocery shopping, and attending medical appointments. Additionally, Esperanza avoided walking down the street for the same reasons.

Maria described herself as not appearing to be undocumented because her physical characteristics did not match the stereotypic Mexican--short, tanned, and with dark hair. Additionally, she spoke English and reported that her resourcefulness in the United States was largely aided by the fact that she could speak the language. Yet, in spite of possessing the characteristics that might make her less susceptible to racial profiling or being identified as an undocumented Mexican immigrant, Maria too expressed feeling fear of being pulled over by police when she drove around town:

Aunque me sienta a veces segura porque hablo inglés y lo que sea, pero cuando va uno manejando, que está en la calle, y de repente me pasa uno (i.e., police),

entonces hújole! Empieza el miedo. Bueno, okay, a ver, a veces da la vuelta o uno se da la vuelta, muchas veces se da la vuelta y se estaciona en un lugar hasta que pasa el policía, por, por no sentir ese miedo (*Even if I sometimes feel secure because I speak English and whatever, but when one is driving and out on the street and suddenly one of them (i.e., police) passes me by, then jeez! The fear begins. Well, okay, let's see, sometimes he turns or one turns, many times one turns and parks someplace until the police passes, only, only to avoid feeling the fear*).

**Psychological distress.** When each participant was directly asked if he or she had been impacted psychologically by being an undocumented Mexican immigrant in the United States, seven of eight participants responded in the affirmative. The reasons each participant thought his or her psychological well-being had been impacted ranged from the constant fear experienced, to ongoing stress, to the emotional toll experienced due to being away from family. The latter was particularly difficult for a group of people whose culture places such a great emphasis on family togetherness.

When Luis was asked why he thought his psychological well-being had been impacted, he responded,

Por no estar con tu familia, no estar al pendiente, o sea, está al pendiente por teléfono, pero no es lo mismo poder abrazar y besar a tu mamá o abrazar y besar a tus hermanos. Bueno, eso es difícil, simplemente. Ahora, de que se enfermó alguien y de que no estás ahí, la preocupación de y si es grave o no es grave. O eso, eso es lo, simplemente estar pensando y ya, ya. Y de que no es tan fácil tomar la decisión de que ahorita agarras las maletas y me voy, o sea, ya estás aquí, ya tienes ocho años aquí. Estas a gusto aquí pero a la vez te ata. De que, que voy a hacer en México? No hay trabajo, no hay. Es de volver a empezar. Yo creo que por eso mucha gente nos quedamos aquí, por el miedo a volver a empezar y otra vez desde abajo (*For not being with your family, not looking out for them, I mean, one does look out for them by telephone, but it is not the same being able to hug and kiss your mother or hug and kiss your siblings. Well, simply put, it is difficult. Now, if someone gets sick and you are not there, you have the worry of whether it is serious or not serious. Or even, that is what it is, you simply are thinking over and over. And it is not so easy to make the decision to grab your suitcase and leaving, I mean, you are already here, you have been here for eight years. You feel at ease here but at the same time it ties you down. It goes from, "what am I going to do in Mexico?" There is no employment, there is not. It*

*means going back and starting over. I think that is why many of us stay here, for fear of going back and starting over again and from the bottom).*

Yet Martin, the only participant who stated he had not been psychologically impacted, added that mental health professionals should know that undocumented Mexican immigrants become depressed from being away from their families:

*Pues que, pues que tenemos momentos a lo mejor también de depresión por estar lejos de la familia. He conocido personas que están, que a lo mejor están tristes, que sufren porque están lejos. Que lo resienten más que yo porque platicando con compañeros así que están lejos de su familia, pues han llorado o lo dicen, se sienten solos (Well that, well that we have periods of possibly depression due to being away from the family. I have met people who are, who are maybe sad, who suffer because they are far away, who are affected more than I am because in talking to coworkers who are away from their families, well, they have cried or they say it, they feel lonely).*

**Stress/uncertainty.** Four of eight participants reported experiences related to feeling stressed or uncertain in differing areas of their life. Esperanza disclosed that as a result of the amount of stress she experiences from not being able to work, worrying constantly about being spotted by police or immigration, her children's well-being, etc., her marital relationship has suffered. She oftentimes has hoped to be able to find a job so her mind might be occupied with work and not with worries and stress: "Le digo, andaba tan a gusto trabajando cuando estaba yo sola. Me despejaba. Me descansaba. Como que descansaba mi cabeza (*I tell you, I was so at ease when I was working alone. My mind cleared up. I rested. My head kind of rested*).

Ricardo explained that a certain tension developed among him and his co-workers. This tension, he said, came as a result of not having job security, which, in turn, fostered a sense of competition between co-workers. He went on to state that his long work hours and tension combined to take a toll on his marital relationship:

El trabajo es agobiante. Hay tensión, tensión entre los mismos compañeros. Entonces eso va haciendo mucha presión, mucha presión. Entonces ya en tu casa ya no eres una persona normal, bueno jejeje no se qué tan normal podamos ser vdd? pero como tú eras antes (*The work is oppressive. There is tensión, tensión between coworkers. Then that creates a lot of pressure, a lot of pressure. Then at home you are no longer a normal person, well, hahaha! I do not know how normal we can really be, right? but not the way you were before*).

For Maria and Daniel, who are married, a large amount of stress comes from not having a valid driver's license because they reportedly know that getting pulled over by a police officer might expose their immigration status. Another source of stress unique to being an undocumented immigrant is related to knowing their oldest son might not have the opportunity to obtain a higher education because he too is undocumented. He reportedly refuses to go back to Mexico after having lived in the United States since he was a baby.

**Feeling insecure (lacking in self-confidence).** Luis and Güera both commented that if they were to obtain legal immigrant status in the United States, they believed they would gain a greater sense of self-confidence. Ricardo, on the other hand, believed being able to communicate in English would provide him with a sense of confidence, indicating his sense of self-confidence was suffering. Luis stated,

Mayor confianza en uno mismo. O sea, como le digo, o sea, vive uno a gusto, vive uno bien pero como que más confianza. El salir simplemente, vuelvo a decir, con tu pareja, a lugares que en verdad tú quieres salir, conocer, y el poder comprar un carro que tu quisieras, por tener tu crédito bien, a las casa, la casa que tu quisieras comprar, todo eso cambia (*Greater confidence in oneself. I mean, like I told you, I mean, one lives at ease, lives well but having more confidence. I mean like more confidence when going out, I will say it again, going out with your partner to places you really want to go. Visiting new places and being able to buy the car you want because you have credit, and houses, the house you would want to buy, all of that would change*).

Güera commented,

Seguridad, emocional y económica. Sabe porque emocional? porque en mi caso, yo inmediatamente me movía más cerca a la frontera, para estar más cerca de mi gente. Este, y si mi hija o sea quiere seguir estudiando aquí o sea darle esa oportunidad, pero yo (ladrido de perro) ya no desligarme de mi gente, de mis (ladrido de perro) tradiciones, de mis costumbres, de mi, de lo que amo y que deje atrás (*Emotional and financial security. Do you know why emotional (emphasis)? Because in my case, I would move closer to the border immediately so I could be closer to my people. Um, and if my daughter like wants to stay here to continue going to school I mean give her that opportunity, but I (dog barks) would no longer be disconnected from my people, from my (dog barks) traditions, from my customs, from myself, from what I love and left behind*).

**Tolerating injustices.** Feeling as though they had no rights or could not demand that they be treated fairly was also a common theme among three of the eight participants. Güera reported ongoing abuse in her marriage, which she felt scared to report for fear of being deported. Later, her fear turned into losing her daughter to her abusive husband because she was undocumented. At work, she also reportedly experienced disrespect from her supervisor; Güera felt she had to endure this because she needed a job, which is difficult for an undocumented immigrant to find.

Ricardo also described injustices--not obtaining fair pay, not having benefits (i.e., medical, retirement, etc.)--experienced in the workplace by him and his co-workers. He further explained that reporting the unfair treatment many times meant risking losing their jobs or possibly be reported to immigration services:

Mucha gente no quiere hablar de eso porque cuando suceden este tipo de situaciones mucha gente no quiere hablarlas ni exponerlas porque también ellos se exponen a perder su trabajo o que en algunas ocasiones uno de los patrones se queje y ya llamen ellos directamente al departamento de inmigración (*Many people do not like to talk about that because when those kinds of situations happen many people do not want to talk about them nor expose them because they also risk losing their jobs. Or in some occasions one of the bosses may file a complaint and they themselves will call the department of immigration directly*).

**Frustration.** Feelings of frustration were also common among five of the eight participants in this study. Esperanza reported frustration at the discrimination she experienced at work and in her marriage due to ongoing financial and occupational stresses. Ricardo's frustration came from unfair treatment at work such as low wages. Daniel's ongoing frustration was most present when facing the immigration problems as he struggled to receive legal representation. Sarai's frustration came when faced with the apparent mistreatment of her children in the school because they did not understand English:

Me moleste porque sí estoy llorando de coraje. Estoy llorando de muchas cosas que siento a la vez. Porque quisiera yo haber aprendido ingles para yo haberles enseñado a mis hijos, para cuando ya vayan a la escuela ya no tengan ese problema (*I was annoyed because I am crying out of rage. I am crying about many things that I feel at the same time because I would have liked to learn English so I could have taught my children, so that when they went to school they would not have that problem*).

### **Positive Aspects of Living in the United States; It Is Not All Bad**

In spite of the challenges faced by participants, five of eight reported they had more opportunities in the United States than they would have had in Mexico. Luis, for example, believed that being exposed to a variety of cultures was an advantage of living in the United States: “más culturas, a la gente, conoces a más gente de Suramérica, de otros países y, yo pienso que es lo bueno (*more cultures, the people, you meet more people from South America, from other countries, and I think that is what is good*).

Some said such opportunities encouraged them to continue living in the United States. Daniel reminisced about his life in Mexico where he had to work seven days a week to pay for his rent but without owning a vehicle. In the United States, however, job



opportunities opened up for him and his wife, Maria, to be able to pay their home payment, afford vehicles for each, and even go on short vacations such as to the mountains to ski.

Similarly, Martin stated that he had the opportunity to have material things he otherwise might not have had or would have been much more difficult to obtain while living in Mexico. Sarai recognized opportunities in terms of learning things for free such as through health campaigns funded by medical clinics or government agencies. In spite of the different treatments she received from people in the United States., Sarai loves the United States the way she loves Mexico due to the good things she has acquired from the United States:

*Quiere uno a su país y también siento querer a este país. Porque estamos aquí independiente de mucha gente buena, gente mala, pero también allá tenemos gente mala y gente buena...yo quiero mucho a este país y igual al mío verdadero porque hay muchas oportunidades buenas (One loves one's country but I also feel love toward this country because we are here regardless of many good people and bad people, but we also have good people and bad people over there...I love this country very much just as I love my own because there are many good opportunities).*

### **Recommendations for Mental Health Professionals**

One of the hopes for the present study was to obtain recommendations for mental health professionals when working with undocumented Mexican immigrants. Each participant was asked to make recommendations for mental health professionals based on what they thought would be relevant to the undocumented Mexican immigrant population. Güera, for example, shared that an immigrant's self-esteem is lowered due to not having "papers" and described a sense of being "beneath" those who are documented. She provided examples of discrimination at work and a sense of having to withstand injustices for fear of retaliation in the form of a report to immigration services.

Therefore, mental health professionals might do well by assessing an undocumented Mexican immigrant's self-esteem and provide the necessary and appropriate interventions to help such a client.

Similarly, Esperanza reported that the life of an undocumented immigrant is difficult in the United States and would recommend that psychologists take the time to truly understand the experiences of undocumented Mexican immigrants. Additionally, having a mental health professional who can help motivate such clients so their self-esteem does not drop would also be helpful according to Esperanza:

No pos nada más que, o sea, como los psicólogos, ojala le sirvan estas conversaciones pa' que vean lo difícil que es un inmigrante aquí. Como sufren los inmigrantes aquí, teniendo familia aquí, es muy, muy difícil, muy, muy difícil. Y luego otra cosa de que bueno pos si hubiera tantos, si hay muchos psicólogos que ayudaran a, no te diré materialmente sino psicológicamente, que, sabes qué? que no se te baje tu autoestima, “échale ganas, o sea, sigue, vas a salir adelante” (*Well more than anything, just like for psychologists, hopefully these conversations will be helpful to them so they can see how difficult it is for an immigrant here. How immigrants suffer here, having their family here, it is very, very difficult, very, very difficult. And then another thing, in case there are many psychologists, for them to help one, not with material things but psychologically with, you know what? with not letting your self-esteem go down, “keep at it” like, “keep going, you will make it”*).

Daniel's recommendation for mental health professionals was for them to try and truly understand the experience of the undocumented Mexican immigrant. Specifically, Daniel suggested that mental health professionals “get down to their level” and immerse themselves in the undocumented culture to truly know the daily challenges faced by them. Luis reminded mental health professionals of the stigma associated with being an undocumented Mexican immigrant in the United States and suggested that it might be difficult for a client to provide this information to a mental health professional.

## Summary

Eight individuals participated in this study. All participants were undocumented Mexican immigrants living in the United States. Individual interviews were conducted with each participant to obtain a better understanding of what it was like for each of them to live as an undocumented immigrant in the United States. Common themes emerged from the interviews that described the participants' experiences in various aspects of their lives. Participants described overall financial problems stemming from having low wages and limited access to employment opportunities. They also recognized several limitations exclusive to undocumented immigrants: a lack of higher education opportunities, limited housing options, and limited access to healthcare. A familial impact was commonly reported as participants described difficulties with childrearing, being separated from their families of origin, and differing ways in which participants' children were impacted. A psychological impact was also universal although it manifested in diverse ways: fear, psychological distress, stress, feelings of insecurity or lacking in self-confidence, feelings of disillusionment, a sense of mourning Mexican culture, tolerating injustices, discrimination, frustration, guilt, feeling invisible, social isolation, and an overarching sense of loss. Other themes included legal problems, regret of immigrating to the United States, and having more opportunities in the United States when compared to Mexico. Participants also made recommendations for mental health professionals in working with undocumented Mexican immigrants.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **DISCUSSION**

#### **Overview of Study**

According to the Department of Homeland Security (2010), an approximated 10.8 million undocumented immigrants reside in the United States with 62% of those having originated from Mexico. While immigrants in general face challenges such as acculturative stress, undocumented immigrants might be faced with additional stressors related to their legal status. The APA (2012) Presidential Task Force on Immigration launched by former APA president, Melba J. T. Vasquez, sought to determine “the psychological factors related to the immigration experience” and recognized undocumented immigrants and their children as a group of people who face “unique challenges” due to their legal status (p. v).

Given the scarcity of literature focused on undocumented Mexican immigrants and their mental health, this study sought to obtain rich information that would provide readers with an accurate understanding of what it is like to be an undocumented Mexican immigrant in the United States. Additionally, this study intended to provide further insight into the unique struggles undocumented Mexican immigrants face in the United States and better understand how their experiences might impact their psychological well-being.

### **Summary and Interpretation of Findings**

To help accomplish the goal of obtaining the needed information about the experiences of undocumented Mexican immigrants, the following two main research questions were developed:

- Q1    What is it like to be an undocumented Mexican immigrant as determined by undocumented Mexican immigrants' experiences and perceptions?
- Q2    How is an undocumented Mexican immigrant's mental health impacted by his or her experiences in the United States?

The shared experiences of the participants in this study were reflected in the emerging themes and helped describe the phenomenon of being an undocumented Mexican immigrant in the United States.

The experiences reported by all participants were social isolation, fear, and separation from their families of origin. Social isolation was a common experience among all participants in this study. This finding was not surprising because undocumented Mexican immigrants are a group of individuals whose culture typically fosters a sense of family interdependence (Falicov, 2005). Unlike other individuals in Hispanic cultures, participants in this study did not have immediate access to their families of origin who provide an important part of their socialization. Without the option of visiting their families or having their families visit them, participants were left with telephone and in some cases online social networks as the only means to maintain contact with their families. For other participants, making friends was perceived as a potential risk of deportation because it oftentimes meant having to drive to friends' homes or other places to maintain contact or participate in social activities. Therefore, many participants sacrificed socialization opportunities out of fear.

All undocumented Mexican immigrants in this study reported fear of being detained by police officers and eventually deported back to Mexico. For some participants, the fear might be better described as terror because being deported back to Mexico oftentimes meant returning to an unsafe place to live where participants' lives might be at risk. The fear of being deported is a common theme among undocumented and documented Latino immigrants (Arbona et al., 2010). While the complete extent to which fear impacts undocumented Mexican immigrants is unknown, the findings in this study suggested that familial and social areas of functioning were impacted. One study (Cavazos-Rehg, Zayas, & Spitznagel, 2007) conducted with documented and undocumented immigrants suggested that the constant fear of deportation puts their emotional well-being and physical health at risk. Moreover, Berk and Schur (2001) identified fear among undocumented Latino immigrants as a barrier for them to access care. Still other studies (Stafford, Chandola, & Marmot, 2007; Whitley & Prince, 2005) indicated that individuals who experienced fear of other things, such as fear of crime, also limited the frequency with which they utilized health promoting services and engaged in social activities. The same studies also found that fear had a negative effect on individuals' overall mental health (Stafford et al., 2007; Whitley & Prince, 2005). Stafford et al. (2007) indicated that participants with higher levels of fear of crime tended to be less physically active and were more likely to have depression than those who had lower levels of fear of crime.

For more than half of the participants in this study, the fear of being deported was transferred to a fear of driving. Like many Americans, participants in this study had to drive themselves to work and take their children to school. Sadly, participants

experienced immense fear on a daily basis as they commuted to and from their places of employment, ran errands such as going to the grocery store, or took their children to school. Thus, the recurring fear experienced by undocumented Mexican immigrants seemed to place them in a vulnerable position to suffer mental health problems and negatively affect their social and daily functioning.

Being separated from their families of origin was another phenomenon experienced by all participants, which caused psychological distress for them. For some participants, the separation elicited feelings of regret, disappointment, sadness, and loneliness. Other participants, such as Luis, described immense suffering as a result of being separated from their families of origin. Lamentably, for participants in this study, the difficulty of dealing with the separation was prolonged for an unknown period of time because the separation was rarely temporary. Participants reportedly knew that if a family member became ill or passed away, they would have face the cruel reality of not being able to go back to Mexico to care for their loved ones or accompany them in the event of a loss. In the event one of them should decide to go to Mexico anyway, participants were also aware they would take the risk of not being able to return to the United States. Thus, it seemed that undocumented Mexican immigrants must pay the high price of being separated from their families for an indefinite period of time if they choose to remain in the United States. The prolonged separation consequently exposed undocumented Mexican immigrants to chronic feelings of distress that could have an overall negative effect on their psychological well-being. Similar findings were reported by Savic, Chur-Hansen, Mahmood, and Moore (2013) whose study showed that Sudanese refugees' mental health was negatively impacted by being separated from their families.

In addition to the difficulties mentioned, undocumented Mexican immigrants' well-being might be impacted in other harmful ways such as discord in the relationships with members of their families of origin as well as difficulty adjusting to U.S. culture (Alderete et al., 1999; Black, 2005; Grzywacz et al., 2005, 2006; Magaña & Hovey, 2003; Perreira et al., 2006).

When identifying the ways in which the experiences of undocumented Mexican immigrants might impact their mental health, attention must be directed at the emerging themes derived from this study. While this study did not formally assess the presence of any specific psychological disorder through the use of measurement instruments, distressing symptoms potentially signaling the presence of mental health problems were reported by participants. Experiences with ongoing anxiety in the form of fear of being deported or fear of driving were the most pronounced among participants in this study. Other distressing symptoms reported by participants included feelings of frustration; feelings of disillusionment; feelings of regret; feelings of guilt, stress, and low self-esteem; and feelings of worthlessness. When asked directly, all except one of the participants acknowledged his or her psychological health had been impacted by the ongoing fear experienced, continued stress, or being separated from his or her family of origin. All in all, the findings in this study indicated that undocumented Mexican immigrants' mental health was adversely impacted by their experiences related to having an undocumented legal status. This finding supported Joseph's (2011) findings with undocumented Brazilian immigrants where a lower quality of life and an overall negative impact on mental health were identified following numerous stressors experienced related to their legal status. Similar to the findings in this study, Joseph found that the lives of



undocumented Brazilian immigrants were negatively affected by experiences of discrimination, separation from their families, and ongoing anxiety manifested through worry and fear of being deported.

Other themes that emerged were also relevant to the mental health of the participants in this study and possibly other undocumented immigrants. Employment, socioeconomic status, and education levels were identified by Williams and Berry (1991) as contributing factors to increased levels of acculturative stress for an immigrant. Participants in this study experienced specific challenges when faced with limited options for employment and housing. When employment was found, the wages tended to be lower, which consequently led to lower socioeconomic status and more limitations on housing options. Additionally, participants found limited or no access to higher education and limited access to health care. Such challenges are considered unique to the experiences of undocumented Mexican immigrants because the limitations mentioned are directly related to their legal status. Therefore, it is suggested that legal status is a demographic and social characteristic of an immigrant and, due to the added challenges imposed on an undocumented immigrant, also a contributing factor to acculturative stress. Williams and Berry suggested that acculturative stress negatively impacts the well-being of individuals, thus making undocumented Mexican immigrants susceptible to this risk.

Additional distressing experiences among undocumented Mexican immigrants in this study included perceived discrimination or unfair treatment. Some participants experienced discrimination at work through earning lower wages than would be earned by a documented individual performing the same duties. Others perceived discrimination

in their children's schools or in their communities. In general, undocumented Mexican immigrants in this study had the perception of being invisible and having to live "in the shadows" in the U.S. culture. Although the objective of this study did not involve measuring the extent to which perceived discrimination impacted the mental health of participants, research told us that an individual's experiences with perceived discrimination or unfair treatment can have *harmful* (emphasis added) effects on his or her mental and physical health (Liebkind & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2000; Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009). Perceived discrimination was linked to increased negative behaviors, stress responses of physiological and psychological nature, and an overall lower involvement in healthy behaviors (Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009).

## **Implications**

### **Theoretical**

Previous literature on Hispanic or Latino immigrants, both documented and undocumented, has placed greater emphasis on cultural adjustment and acculturative stress among immigrants (Arbona et al., 2010; Berry et al., 1987; Hovey, 2000a, 2000b; Hovey & King, 1996). As discussed in previous chapters, Berry et al. (1987) suggested that acculturative stress could have a negative impact on immigrants' well-being. The relationship between an immigrant's acculturation experience and other stressors were identified as ultimately resulting in differing levels of acculturative stress (Berry et al., 1987). Five factors were also identified by Berry et al.'s model of acculturative stress and were suggested to impact the relationship: (a) nature of the larger society, (b) type of acculturating group, (c) modes of acculturation, (d) psychological characteristics of the person, and (e) demographic and social characteristics of the person. The findings from

this study indicating that participants experienced psychological distress manifested as chronic anxiety for fear of being deported among other experiences suggested that the legal status of an undocumented Mexican immigrant in the United States could be considered a demographic and social characteristic of an immigrant. As such, the quality of being undocumented would contribute to the five factors identified by Berry et al.'s model of acculturative stress. Furthermore, the combination of this new demographic and social characteristic (i.e., undocumented legal status) with the acculturation process an immigrant might experience could result in increased levels of acculturative stress and have an overall negative impact on that individual's well-being. With that in mind, the findings of this study supported the speculation that if an immigrant has an undocumented legal status, he or she might be at risk of experiencing higher acculturative stress and poorer mental health than immigrants with documented legal status. Although acculturative stress levels were not directly measured in this study, it could be concluded that undocumented Mexican immigrants in this study might be experiencing higher levels of acculturative stress that, in turn, could negatively influence their mental health through manifestations of anxiety, isolation, and other distressing feelings.

Despite the challenges faced by undocumented Mexican immigrants as a disenfranchised group in U.S. society, they have little hope of legalizing their status or being provided with benefits such as authorization to work legally in the United States. The reader need only search the words "illegal immigrants" in a popular internet search engine to become cognizant of the lack of empathy toward and criminalization attributed to undocumented immigrants, particularly those of Mexican origin, and the overall anti-immigrant sentiment portrayed through online images. For these reasons, I would like to

propose that the findings of this study also serve to promote social justice for this marginalized group of individuals and, starting with mental health professionals, help others begin to see undocumented immigrants as human beings and not as criminals or “illegals.”

Such a task, I believe, could be accomplished through applying the Social Empathy model (Domokos-Cheng Ham, 2014; Segal, 2011). The Social Empathy model draws from social responsibility theory, which suggests that “individuals or organizations have an obligation to act to benefit society at large” (Domokos-Cheng Ham, 2014, p. 17). Social empathy might be described as a broader concept that encompasses “(a) individual empathy; (b) sociocultural, economic, and historical contexts; and (c) social responsibility” (Domokos-Cheng Ham, 2014, p. 17) and serves as a framework to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of a group of people. In this new model, Segal (2011) suggested that through applying empathy to social systems, people are compelled to behave in ways that encourage social justice.

Domokos-Cheng Ham (2014) explained that empathy, contextual understanding, and social responsibility are interacting factors that contribute to the Social Empathy model. First, empathy allows people to foresee what an individual might be thinking or feeling as well as respond to that individual in a sympathizing manner. To obtain a genuine empathic response, Domokos-Cheng Ham made clear that people must also show their empathy by identifying the emotions and predicting the needs of said individual. However, Domokos-Cheng Ham proposed that empathy by itself was not enough to provide care for the individual. Therefore, people must also immerse themselves into the context of the individual’s emotional distress because it is part of the

individual's life. For that reason, people should inquire and learn about the world of the individual and set aside their own values about him or her (Domokos-Cheng Ham, 2014). Otherwise, inaccurate assumptions about the individual could be made. Lastly, social responsibility comes into play in the Social Empathy model by means of utilizing the empathy acquired, through considering the individual's life context, and accurately identifying the needs of the individual. After an accurate empathic understanding is obtained, Domokos-Cheng (2014) suggested that people feel impelled to be socially responsible and act in accordance to the needs of the individual.

It is my belief that through gaining a deeper understanding and knowledge of the experiences of undocumented Mexican immigrants, a broader context into the lives of this population could be obtained and empathic insights, in turn, might develop toward this oppressed and in many ways invisible group. Segal (2011) suggested that by interviewing participants so they tell their stories, researchers bear witness to those stories and as a result help bring about social change. This study contributed to this process by providing a space for participants to tell their stories. Furthermore, the reader and I have also contributed to this process by bearing witness to those stories.

### **Methodological**

The current study was a qualitative study guided by a constructivist paradigm in which the nature of reality was comprised of several yet equally valid realities (Ponterotto, 2005). Additionally, a phenomenological research design was employed to help answer one of the research questions (i.e., what is it like to be an undocumented Mexican immigrant as determined by undocumented Mexican immigrants' experiences and perceptions?). The constructivist paradigm was especially relevant in this topic

because the experiences of several different undocumented Mexican immigrants were considered and were equally important despite their similarities and differences. Through a phenomenological design, this study was able to attain the goal of deeply understanding the common experiences and perceptions of the participants and, as a result of the new understanding, also understand ways in which participants' mental health had been impacted. In conclusion, the methodology employed in this study was a strength because it helped answer both research questions.

Although it was established that participants' mental health was impacted by their experiences as undocumented Mexican immigrants in the United States, the reader might wonder the extent to which participants' mental health was impacted. To further clarify this question, future research involving quantitative approaches might employ the use of psychological instruments such as self-report questionnaires to identify psychological symptoms and their severity. Furthermore, quantitative approaches might be useful in comparing larger samples and possibly identifying sub-groups among undocumented Mexican immigrants in an effort to clarify their mental health needs. For example, undocumented Mexican immigrants living near the border with Mexico might be experiencing higher levels of distress if the presence of immigration officials was more pronounced in those areas.

Longitudinal studies, both qualitative and quantitative in nature, would also be necessary to identify any changes in undocumented Mexican immigrants' mental health as well as potentially discovering influencing factors. For example, for undocumented Mexican immigrants living in U.S. states where the percentage of Hispanic or Latino population is lower, when compared to other states in the country, might potentially add

to undocumented Mexican immigrants' sense of isolation. Additionally, it would be helpful to know if an undocumented Mexican immigrant's perceptions changed significantly as time passed or if their experiences continued.

### **Clinical**

By providing a more in-depth understanding of the lives of undocumented Mexican immigrants, counseling psychologists might have an increased understanding of these immigrants' challenges. One such challenge mentioned previously was the constant threat of being detained by police officers and eventually returned to Mexico. It is important to understand that such a threat is real; in 2010, 73% of those individuals removed from the United States were of Mexican origin (Department of Homeland Security, 2011). Counseling psychologists might aim their clinical interventions at helping undocumented clients enhance their coping skills to manage chronic anxiety and stress based on an actual threat.

Perceived discrimination and mistreatment in their places of employment was also an issue discussed by participants in this study. It might serve well for counseling psychologists to be informed about undocumented immigrants' rights in order to help empower their clients throughout the process of treatment. Specifically, learning about labor laws and their applicability for undocumented workers or an undocumented immigrant's rights if detained could help counseling psychologists distinguish between perceived and real risks for their undocumented clients. Counseling psychologists might ultimately become advocates for undocumented immigrant clients by helping them seek resources to become knowledgeable about their legal rights. As a result, mental health clinicians' efforts might serve to help undocumented clients manage their anxieties and

fears and possibly gain greater self-confidence. One participant in this study suggested that mental health practitioners be encouraging to undocumented immigrants in an effort to help keep their spirits high. Given that participants in this study expressed a desire to succeed and help their families, mental health professionals would do well to utilize undocumented Mexican immigrants' desire to provide for their families as a means of enhancing motivation. In turn, undocumented clients might feel encouraged to continue pushing forward.

Findings in this study also suggested that undocumented immigrants might not seek mental health services either for fear of exposing their legal status or due to a lack of knowledge about the resources available to them. One participant suggested that mental health professionals step into the community and approach immigrants to offer help because it was unlikely undocumented immigrants would seek services. In this regard, mental health practitioners are encouraged to network with places such as public low cost medical clinics in their respective communities where minority populations, such as undocumented immigrants, are likely to be served. The purpose of this networking attempt would be to gain access to the undocumented population and offer mental health services. Additionally, seeking undocumented clients might help lessen their feelings of invisibility and instead convey the message that others are concerned about them.

Some participants anticipated challenges in their children's academic future following high school graduation or upon knowing they are undocumented. When working with families, mental health practitioners, including school counselors, might do well in reading literature about undocumented youth to better understand the struggles specific to that population such as difficulty with forming their identities and feelings of



isolation (Gonzales, Suarez-Orozco, & Dedios-Sanguinetti, 2013). When working with parents of those youth, facilitating an open discussion about the reasons behind immigrating, whether or not the family plans to return to their country of origin, and actively planning for the children's futures, such as through looking for resources, might be helpful for all involved.

Previous literature on working with Latino families in therapy would also be applicable in working with undocumented immigrants. When working with undocumented clients, it is recommended that clients be assigned to a therapist who can speak their native language in order to successfully collect the family history during the initial assessment (Breton & Ocegüera, 2008). The therapist does not need to be of the same ethnic background as the clients; yet it is essential that the therapist understand the presenting problems and be culturally sensitive (Falicov, 1998). For a mental health therapist to build a relationship with an undocumented client, it is critical he or she emphasizes that the client's legal status will not be disclosed (Breton & Ocegüera, 2008). Counseling psychologists should take into consideration the findings of this study--that undocumented Mexican immigrants experience chronic fear and worry about being found out and deported. Additional precautions, in the form of explaining the limits of confidentiality, might be taken such as who may have access to the client's identifiable information and whether or not immigration status could be revealed. Asking for detailed information about the clients' immigration stories might also be appropriate because treatment could be linked to the clients' immigration experiences (Breton & Ocegüera, 2008). For example, a therapist might find that a client presenting with post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms was sexually abused or extorted while crossing to the United

States (Breton & Ocegüera, 2008). Given the vast number of factors involved in the experiences of undocumented immigrants, clinicians might find that conducting a detailed intake interview with this population could provide him or her with crucial information to deeply understand the presenting concerns and develop the most appropriate and sensitive treatment plans.

Based on the limited financial resources as a result of scarce employment options for undocumented Mexican immigrants, mental health services might be difficult to access due to financial limitations. Mental health professionals might consider more economical ways of delivering services to undocumented clients. One idea would be to provide group therapy as a therapeutic intervention and modality. Considering that social isolation was a common theme among participants in this study, a group modality might provide a dual benefit for undocumented clients.

The findings of this study might provide additional information in the area of multicultural competencies for counseling psychologists. Specifically, this study provided a deeper understanding of the experiences, including challenges, of adult, undocumented Mexican immigrants in the United States. Such information might be employed in applied psychological practices such as therapy interventions. It may be useful to other professionals such as those in healthcare professions including physicians and nurses as well as other helping professions such as social workers and teachers who are likely to come into contact with undocumented immigrants. Additionally, it might help enhance empathy toward the undocumented Mexican immigrant population and result in more effective treatment.

### **Limitations**

A potential limitation of this study was the data were collected in Spanish and the results were presented in English. The reason the data were collected in Spanish is because Spanish is the native language of the participants. The data were also analyzed in Spanish, themes derived in English, and the only translations were those of quotes derived from the transcripts. To reduce the potential for misinterpretation, where it was feasible, I provided quotes in the original language immediately followed by their English translations. Despite my attempts at providing as clear and accurate representations of the experiences of each participant as possible, the reader must rely on the translations and interpretations provided by me. Additionally, the reader should consider that the results presented were undoubtedly my interpretations. It is possible that my own biases might have influenced the interpretation of the findings even though I attempted to be as transparent as I could.

Related to the impact on the mental health of the participants in this study was the fact that little information about participants' previous mental health history, including a history of trauma or substance abuse, was gathered. Therefore, it is unknown whether the difficulty some participants reported in adjusting to U.S. culture might have been related to previous mental health concerns. Future research with this population might focus on gathering more extensive background information to assess the presence of risk factors present prior to immigrating to the United States.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Some people might admire the courage of undocumented Mexican immigrants to leave behind their families, friends, and the only life they knew in hopes of finding

something better. Some might consider such a decision to be an enormous leap of faith or an act of love, while still others might refer to it as foolish or unnecessary. Everyone has personal beliefs and opinions about *illegal immigration* (emphasis added) but few will truly understand the motives behind this act and the driving forces that push an undocumented immigrant to risk it all. Perhaps even fewer will have an accurate understanding of what it is like to live in an undocumented Mexican immigrant's shoes, much less the valor it must take to make the decision each day to continue living in the shadows knowing that he or she does not belong. I would like to end this study by quoting one of the participants, Sarai:

Uno se tiene que hacer fuerte y hacerse a la idea de que uno tomo esa decisión sabiendo que no los tenemos [papeles]. Quizá la tomamos porque sabemos que allá no había una vida para nosotros, estaba mejor acá. Pero también sabemos eso, que no somos de este país (*One has to be strong and get used to the idea that one made the decision knowing that one did not have them [papers]. Maybe we made it [the decision] because we know that there was not life for us back there [Mexico], that it was better here [U.S.]. But we also know it, that we are not from this country*).

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**APPENDIX A**  
**INFORMED CONSENT IN ENGLISH**



UNIVERSITY of  
NORTHERN COLORADO



Informed Consent for Participation in Research  
University of Northern Colorado

Project Title: Being undocumented in the U.S.: The impact on Mexican immigrants' mental health.

Researcher: Karina B. Samaniego-Muñoz, B.A.  
Program: Counseling Psychology, Doctoral Student  
Department: Counseling Psychology Department  
E-mail: sama4866@bears.unco.edu  
Phone Number: (970) 978-5559

Research Advisor: Basilia Softas-Nall, Ph.D., L.P.  
Department: Counseling Psychology  
E-mail: Basilia.Softas-Nall@unco.edu  
Phone Number: (970) 351-1631

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Joining the study is voluntary and you may refuse to join or you may withdraw from the study at any time.

The purpose of this study is to understand experiences that are unique to undocumented Mexican immigrants; experiences that may be affecting immigrants' psychological well-being. One of the benefits of this study will be to inform mental health professionals what they can do to better serve undocumented immigrants. We think our goal can be reached by learning what it is like to be an undocumented immigrant in the United States.

This study will take place in the form of an interview. You will be asked a series of questions in relation to your experience such as, "Do you regret your decision of immigrating to the United States?" The interview may last up to two hours. Additionally, I may conduct a follow-up interview, in person or by phone, to make sure I captured your perspective correctly. The follow-up interview will take no more than 20 minutes.

The interview will be digitally recorded and the recordings will be used for transcription purposes. They will be transferred to a CD after the interview, kept locked inside a filing cabinet, and destroyed one year after the recordings are transcribed.

Measures will be taken to protect your confidentiality and identity. You will be asked to give a fake name at the beginning of the interview. If I should make reference to your interview, I will use the fake name you provided and not your real name. Additionally, you will not be asked to sign any documents, including this form. By answering any of the interview questions you indicate your consent to participate in the study.

You will be offered a \$30.00 gift card as a small token of appreciation of your help. A possible benefit of participating in this study is that you may experience a sense of relief from discussing aspects of your experiences. A potential risk is that you may feel uncomfortable when sharing personal experiences with me.

You have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this research. If you have questions, or concerns, you should contact the researchers listed on the first page of this form.

Thank you for participating and helping me with this study.

Sincerely,

Karina B. Samaniego-Muñoz, B.A.

*Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact the Sponsored Programs and Academic Research Center, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-1907.*

---

Researcher's Signature

---

Date

**APPENDIX B**

**INFORMED CONSENT IN SPANISH**

UNIVERSITY of  
NORTHERN COLORADO



Consentimiento Informado para Participación en un Estudio  
Universidad del Norte de Colorado

Título del Proyecto: Ser indocumentado/a en los Estados Unidos: El impacto en la salud mental de inmigrantes Mexicanos.

Investigadora: Karina B. Samaniego-Muñoz, B.A.  
Programa: Counseling Psychology, Estudiante de Doctorado  
Departamento: Counseling Psychology Department  
E-mail: sama4866@bears.unco.edu  
Número Telefónico: (970) 978-5559

Asesora de Investigación: Basilia Softas-Nall, Ph.D., L.P.  
Departamento: Counseling Psychology  
E-mail: Basilia.Softas-Nall@unco.edu  
Número Telefónico: (970) 351-1631

Se le está pidiendo que participe en un estudio. Ingresar en el estudio es una decisión voluntaria y usted puede rehusarse a participar o decidir ya no participar en cualquier momento.

El propósito de éste estudio es entender las experiencias que son únicas a los inmigrantes Mexicanos indocumentados; experiencias que puedan estar afectando su salud mental. Éste estudio podrá servir para informar a los profesionales de salud mental sobre lo que pueden hacer para proveer mejores servicios a los inmigrantes indocumentados. Pensamos que podemos lograr nuestro propósito al aprender qué se siente ser un inmigrante indocumentado en los Estados Unidos.

Éste estudio se realizara por medio de una entrevista. Se le harán una serie de preguntas en relación a su experiencia tales como, “¿Se arrepiente de haber inmigrado a los Estados Unidos?” La entrevista puede durar hasta dos horas. Además, es probable que le haga una segunda entrevista, en persona o por teléfono, para asegurarme de que capte correctamente su perspectiva. La segunda entrevista no se demorará más de 20 minutos.

La entrevista será grabada digitalmente y las grabaciones serán utilizadas con fines de transcripción. Después de la entrevista las grabaciones serán transferidas a un CD, guardadas dentro de un gabinete bajo llave, y destruidas un año después de ser transcriptas.

Se tomarán medidas de seguridad para mantener su confidencialidad y proteger su identidad. Se le pedirá que escoja un nombre falso al principio de la entrevista. Si por alguna razón yo menciono su entrevista, lo haré usando el nombre falso que usted escogió pero no su nombre verdadero. Además, no se le pedirá que firme ningún documento, incluyendo el presente. Al contestar cualquiera de las preguntas de la entrevista, usted está dando su consentimiento para participar en éste estudio.

Como muestra de agradecimiento por su participación en este estudio, se le ofrecerá una tarjeta de regalo con un valor de \$30.00. Es probable que usted sienta alivio como resultado de hablar sobre sus experiencias. También es posible que usted se sienta incomodo al hablar sobre sus experiencias.

Usted tiene derecho a hacer preguntas sobre cualquier duda que usted tenga sobre este estudio. Si tiene preguntas, o dudas, usted deberá contactar a la investigadora nombrada en la primera página de este documento.

Gracias por su participación y por ayudarme con este estudio.

Atentamente,

Karina B. Samaniego-Muñoz, B.A.

*Su participación es voluntaria. Usted puede decidir no participar en este estudio y si usted empieza a participar de cualquier manera puede decidir parar y retirarse en cualquier momento. Su decisión será respetada y no resultara en perdida de los beneficios a los cuales usted tiene derecho. Habiendo leído lo anterior y tenido la oportunidad de hacer cualquier pregunta, por favor firme abajo si le gustaría participar en este estudio. Se le entregara una copia de este documento para sus archivos. Si tiene alguna preocupación sobre su selección o trato como participante, por favor contacte a Sponsored Programs and Academic Research Center, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-1907.*

---

Firma de la investigadora

---

Fecha

**APPENDIX C**

**DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION FORM IN ENGLISH**

UNIVERSITY of  
NORTHERN COLORADO



Demographic Information Form

Project Title: Being Undocumented in the U.S.: The impact on Mexican immigrants' mental health.

Researcher: Karina B. Samaniego-Muñoz, B.A.  
 Program: Counseling Psychology, Doctoral Student  
 Department: Counseling Psychology Department  
 E-mail: sama4866@bears.unco.edu  
 Phone Number: (970) 978-5559

Research Advisor: Basilia Softas-Nall, Ph.D., L.P.  
 Department: Counseling Psychology Department  
 E-mail: Basilia.Softas-Nall@unco.edu  
 Phone Number: (970) 351-1631

\_\_\_\_\_

Pseudonym

Age	Gender	Length of time in U.S.	Place of origin
-----	--------	------------------------	-----------------

English Language Fluency:

Speaks English	Yes	No	Comment: _____
Reads English	Yes	No	Comment: _____
Writes English	Yes	No	Comment: _____

Employment status:

Employed	Yes	No	Comment: _____
Occupation in U.S.:	_____		
Prev. occupation in Mexico:	_____		

Familial status:

Single	Married	Living Together	Country where partner lives _____
--------	---------	-----------------	-----------------------------------

# of children: _____	Where do children live? _____
----------------------	-------------------------------

Education:

Highest level completed: \_\_\_\_\_ Comment: \_\_\_\_\_

Housing situation:

\_\_\_\_ Rent    \_\_\_\_ Own    \_\_\_\_ Homeless    Lives with: \_\_\_\_\_

Comment: \_\_\_\_\_



**APPENDIX D**

**DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION FORM IN SPANISH**

UNIVERSITY of  
NORTHERN COLORADO



Demographic Information Form

Project Title: Being Undocumented in the U.S.: The impact on Mexican immigrants' mental health.

Researcher: Karina B. Samaniego-Muñoz, B.A.  
 Program: Counseling Psychology, Doctoral Student  
 Department: Counseling Psychology Department  
 E-mail: sama4866@bears.unco.edu  
 Phone Number: (970) 978-5559

Research Advisor: Basilia Softas-Nall, Ph.D., L.P.  
 Department: Counseling Psychology Department  
 E-mail: Basilia.Softas-Nall@unco.edu  
 Phone Number: (970) 351-1631

Seudónimo \_\_\_\_\_

Edad	Sexo	Tiempo en EE.UU.	Lugar de origen
------	------	------------------	-----------------

English Language Fluency:

Habla inglés	Sí	No	Comentario: _____
Lee inglés	Sí	No	Comentario: _____
Escribe inglés	Sí	No	Comentario: _____

Employment status:

Empleado	Sí	No	Comentario: _____
Oficio en EE.UU.: _____		Oficio anterior en México: _____	

Familial status:

Soltero/a	Casado/a	Viviendo Juntos	¿En que país vive la pareja?: _____
-----------	----------	-----------------	-------------------------------------

# de hijos: \_\_\_\_\_ ¿Dónde viven los hijos? \_\_\_\_\_

## Education:

Nivel más alto completado: \_\_\_\_\_ Comentario: \_\_\_\_\_

## Housing situation:

\_\_\_\_ Renta/Alquila    \_\_\_\_ Dueño    \_\_\_\_ Sin hogar    Vive con: \_\_\_\_\_

Comentario: \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX E**

**INTERVIEW GUIDE IN ENGLISH**

UNIVERSITY of  
NORTHERN COLORADO



Interview Guide

Project Title: Being Undocumented in the U.S.: The Impact on Mexican Immigrants' Mental Health.

Researcher: Karina B. Samaniego-Muñoz, B.A.  
 Program: Counseling Psychology, Doctoral Student  
 Department: Counseling Psychology Department  
 E-mail: sama4866@bears.unco.edu  
 Phone Number: (970) 978-5559

Research Advisor: Basilia Softas-Nall, Ph.D., L.P.  
 Department: Counseling Psychology Department  
 E-mail: Basilia.Softas-Nall@unco.edu  
 Phone Number: (970) 351-1631

1. I would like to know what the life of an undocumented immigrant is like in the United States. Please tell me what it has been like for you to live in the U.S. as an undocumented immigrant.

*The following questions may be asked to facilitate a discussion about the participant's experience.*

What does it feel like to be here without legal documentation?

It may be useful to describe your life in the United States by comparing it to how it was in Mexico. Compared to life in Mexico, where you had papers, how is life here without papers?

Family life:

- How has your family life been impacted as a result of you being in the U.S. as an undocumented immigrant?
- Family in this country?
  - What is it like for you?
- Family in Mexico?
  - What is it like for you?
- How satisfied are you with your family life?
- Is there something you would like to be different?

**Social life:**

- How has your social life been impacted as a result of you being in the U.S. as an undocumented immigrant?
- How satisfied are you with your social life?
- Is there something you would like to be different?

**Romantic life:**

- How has your romantic life been impacted as a result of you being in the U.S. as an undocumented immigrant?
- How satisfied are you with your romantic life?
- Is there something you would like to be different?

**Housing situation:**

- Please tell me about your housing arrangements.
  - Where do you live?
  - Who do you live with?
- How has your housing situation or home life been impacted as a result of you being in the U.S. as an undocumented immigrant?
- How satisfied are you with your housing arrangements?
- Is there something you would like to be different?

**Financial situation:**

- Please tell me about your financial situation.
- How has your financial situation been impacted as a result of you being in the U.S. as an undocumented immigrant?
- How satisfied are you with your financial situation?
- Is there something you would like to be different?

**Employment situation:**

- Please tell me about your employment situation.
  - Do you have a job?
  - What do you do?
- How has your employment situation been impacted as a result of you being in the U.S. as an undocumented immigrant?
- How satisfied are you with your employment?
- Is there something you would like to be different?

**Language:**

- Please tell me what it is like for you to live in the U.S. where the language is different than your own.
  - Do you speak English?
  - If yes, how did you learn it?
  - If no, why not?

- How satisfied are you with the English you speak?
- Is there something you would like to be different?

Discrimination:

- Do you think you have been treated differently, unfairly, or discriminated against for being undocumented? Do you have an example?
2. Do you regret your decision of immigrating to the U.S. without papers?
  3. How different do you think your life in the U.S. would be if you had papers?
  4. One of the purposes of this study is to inform mental health professionals what they can do to better serve undocumented immigrants.
    - a. Do you think being undocumented in the U.S. has affected you psychologically or emotionally? If so, how?
    - b. In your opinion, what are some things mental health professionals (i.e., psychologists, counselors) should know when treating undocumented immigrants?
  5. Is there anything else that you would like to add that may help me better understand what it is like to be an undocumented immigrant?

**APPENDIX F**

**INTERVIEW GUIDE IN SPANISH**



UNIVERSITY of  
NORTHERN COLORADO



Interview Guide

Project Title: Ser indocumentado/a en los Estados Unidos: El impacto en la salud mental de inmigrantes Mexicanos.

Researcher: Karina B. Samaniego-Muñoz, B.A.  
 Program: Counseling Psychology, Doctoral Student  
 Department: Counseling Psychology Department  
 E-mail: sama4866@bears.unco.edu  
 Phone Number: (970) 978-5559

Research Advisor: Basilia Softas-Nall, Ph.D., L.P.  
 Department: Counseling Psychology Department  
 E-mail: Basilia.Softas-Nall@unco.edu  
 Phone Number: (970) 351-1631

1. Me gustaría saber cómo es la vida de un inmigrante indocumentado en los Estados Unidos. Por favor dígame cómo ha sido para usted vivir en los Estados Unidos como un inmigrante indocumentado.

*The following questions may be asked to facilitate a discussion about the participant's experience.*

¿Qué se siente estar aquí sin documentación legal?

Tal vez le ayude a describir su vida en Estados Unidos si compara como era su vida en México. A comparación con su vida en Mexico, en donde sii tenia papeles, ¿como es su vida aqui sin papeles?

Family life:

- ¿Cómo ha impactado su vida el ser un inmigrante indocumentado en Estados Unidos?
- ¿Tiene usted familia en éste país?
  - ¿Cómo es para usted?
- ¿Tiene usted familia en México?
  - ¿Cómo es para usted?
- ¿Qué tan satisfecho/a esta usted con su vida familiar?
- ¿Hay algo que le gustaría fuera diferente?

Social life:

- ¿Cómo ha impactado su vida social el ser un inmigrante indocumentado en Estados Unidos?
- ¿Qué tan satisfecho/a está usted con su vida social?
- ¿Hay algo que le gustaría fuera diferente?

Romantic life:

- ¿Cómo ha impactado su vida romántica el ser un inmigrante indocumentado en Estados Unidos?
- ¿Qué tan satisfecho/a está usted con su vida romántica?
- ¿Hay algo que le gustaría fuera diferente?

Housing situation:

- Por favor hableme de sus arreglos de vivienda.
  - ¿En dónde vive?
  - ¿Con quién vive?
- ¿Cómo ha impactado sus arreglos de vivienda el ser un inmigrante indocumentado en Estados Unidos?
- ¿Qué tan satisfecho/a está usted con sus arreglos de vivienda?
- ¿Hay algo que le gustaría fuera diferente?

Financial situation:

- Por favor hableme de su situación económica.
- ¿Cómo ha impactado su situación económica el ser un inmigrante indocumentado en Estados Unidos?
- ¿Qué tan satisfecho/a está usted con su situación económica?
- ¿Hay algo que le gustaría fuera diferente?

Employment situation:

- Por favor hableme de su situación de empleo.
  - ¿Tiene usted trabajo?
  - ¿A qué se dedica?
- ¿Cómo ha impactado su situación de empleo el ser un inmigrante indocumentado en Estados Unidos?
- ¿Qué tan satisfecho/a está usted con su situación de empleo?
- ¿Hay algo que le gustaría fuera diferente?

Language:

- Por favor hableme de lo que es para usted vivir en los Estados Unidos en donde el idioma es diferente al suyo.
  - ¿Habla usted inglés?
  - Si sí, ¿Cómo lo aprendió?
  - Si no, ¿por qué no?
- ¿Qué tan satisfecho está usted con el nivel de inglés que habla?
- ¿Hay algo que le gustaría fuera diferente?

Discrimination:

- Do you think you have been treated differently, unfairly, or discriminated against for being undocumented? Do you have an example?
- 2. ¿Se arrepiente de haber inmigrado a los Estados Unidos sin papeles?
- 3. Que tan diferente cree que seria su vida en Estados Unidos si tuviera papeles?
- 4. Uno de los propositos de este estudio es informar a los profesionales de salud mental sobre maneras para mejor servir a inmigrantes indocumentados.
  - a. ¿Cree usted que el ser indocumentado en Estados Unidos le ha afectado psicologicamente o emocionalmente? ¿ Cómo?
  - b. En su opinion, cuales son algunas de las cosas que los profesionales de salud mental (psicologos, consejeros) deben saber cuando tartan a inmigrantes indocumentados?
- 5. ¿Hay algo más que quisiera contarme y que me pueda ayudar a entender mejor lo que se siente ser un inmigrante indocumentado?

**APPENDIX G**

**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL**

UNIVERSITY of  
**NORTHERN COLORADO**  
 Institutional Review Board (IRB)



January 5, 2012

TO: Susan Collins  
 Gerontology

FROM: Gary Heise, Co-Chair *GH*  
 UNC Institutional Review Board

RE: Expedited Review of Proposal, *Being Undocumented in the United States: The Impact on Mexican Immigrant's Mental Health*, submitted by Karina B. Samaniego-Munoz (Research Advisor: Lia Softas-Nall)

First Consultant: The above proposal is being submitted to you for an expedited review. Please review the proposal in light of the Committee's charge and direct requests for changes directly to the researcher or researcher's advisor. If you have any unresolved concerns, please contact Gary Heise, School of Sport and Exercise Science, Campus Box 39, (x1738). When you are ready to recommend approval, sign this form and return to me.

I recommend approval as is.

*Susan Collins*  
 Signature of First Consultant

*1/27/12*  
 Date

The above referenced prospectus has been reviewed for compliance with HHS guidelines for ethical principles in human subjects research. The decision of the Institutional Review Board is that the project is approved as proposed for a period of one year: *3/5/2012* to *3/5/2013*.

*Gary D. Fin*  
 Megan Babkes Cellino, Co-Chair

*5 Mar 2012*  
 Date

Comments:

*See correspondence of revisions attached*

*I emailed re: minor consent revision -*

**APPENDIX H**

**INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR FIRST PILOT STUDY**

UNIVERSITY of  
NORTHERN COLORADO



Interview Guide

Project Title: The Emotional and Social Adjustment Difficulties Faced By Mexican, First-generation, Male Immigrants.

Researcher: Karina B. Samaniego-Munoz, B.A.  
 Program: Counseling Psychology, PsyD. - Student  
 Department: School of Applied Psychology and Counselor Education  
 Phone Number: (970) 978-5559

Research Advisor: Maria Lahman, Ph.D.  
 Department: Program of Applied Statistics and Research Methods  
 Phone Number: (970) 351-1603

Overall experience:

- Please tell me where you are from and how long you have lived in the United States.
- Please tell me what it is like for you to live in the United States.
  - What does it feel like for you to be here?
- What are some things that you like?
- What are some things that you do not like?
- Family
  - Family in this country?
    - What is that like for you?
  - Family in Mexico?
    - What is that like for you?

Social life:

- As compared to when you lived in Mexico, how difficult has it been for you to make friends in the United States?
- How satisfied are you with your social life?
  - What would you like to be different?
- What is your social life like?
  - How do you feel about your social life?

Romantic life:

- As compared to when you lived in Mexico, how difficult has it been for you to be involved in a romantic relationship?
- How satisfied are you with your romantic life?

- What would you like to be different?
- What is your romantic life like?
  - How do you feel about your romantic life?

Additional:

- Is there anything else that you consider important and would like to add?
  - What did I not ask you that you think I should have asked?



**APPENDIX I**

**INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR SECOND PILOT STUDY**

UNIVERSITY of  
NORTHERN COLORADO



Interview Guide

Project Title: The Emotional and Social Adjustment Difficulties Faced By Mexican,  
First-generation, Male Immigrants.

Researcher: Karina B. Samaniego-Munoz, B.A.  
Program: Counseling Psychology, PhD - Student  
Department: Counseling Psychology Department  
Phone Number: (970) 978-5559

Research Advisor: Maria Lahman, PhD  
Department: Program of Applied Statistics and Research Methods  
Phone Number: (970) 351-1603

- Please tell me where you are from and how long you have lived in the United States
- Tell me a story about what an undocumented immigrant's life is like in the United States

Follow-up (if necessary):

- Life
  - Is it different from life in Mexico?
  - How satisfied are you with your life?
  - What would you like to be different?
- Tell me about your family
- Tell me a story about the social life of an undocumented immigrant in the United States
  - Is it different from the social life in Mexico?
  - How satisfied are you with your social life?
  - What would you like to be different?
- Tell me a story about the romantic life of an undocumented immigrant in the United States
  - Is it different from romantic life in Mexico?
  - How satisfied are you with your romantic life?
  - What would you like to be different?

Additional:

- Is there anything else that you consider important and would like to add?
- What did I not ask you that you think I should have asked?

**APPENDIX J**  
**PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS**

	Güera	Sarai	Esperanza	Maria	Daniel	Ricardo	Martin	Luis
<b>Age</b>	42	33	30	47	49	49	21	27
<b>Sex</b>	Female	Female	Female	Female	Male	Male	Male	Male
<b>How long in U.S.</b>	12 yrs	9 yrs	12 yrs	16 yrs	17 yrs	14 yrs	18 mo	8 yrs
<b>Place of origin</b>	Chihuahua Mexico	Zacatecas Mexico	Tamaulipas Mexico	Guadalajara Mexico	Guadalajara Mexico	Guadalajara Mexico	Durango Mexico	Jalisco Mexico
<b>Reason for immigrating</b>	Did not say	Life in danger in Mexico	Visiting family, met husband and stayed	Reunite with husband	Earn money to start own business in Mexico	Life in danger in Mexico	Seeking financial opportunities	Seeking financial opportunities
<b>English language fluency</b>								
<b>Speak</b>	A Little	Very Little	No	A Little	Very Little	Yes	No	Yes
<b>Read</b>	A little	A Little	No	A Little	A Little	Yes	No	Yes
<b>Write</b>	No	A Little	No	A Little	Not Much	Yes	No	Yes
<b>Employed</b>	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Occupation</b>	Unemployed	Homemaker	Homemaker	Maintenance	Holding signs	Construction	Construction	Construction
<b>Previous occupation (Mexico)</b>	N/A	N/A	N/A	Secretary	Optometrist	Police	Agriculture	Construction
<b>Familial status (Single, Married, Cohabitate)</b>	Divorced	Married	Married	Married	Married	Married	Cohabitate	Single
<b>Country where partner lives</b>	N/A	USA	USA	USA	USA	USA	USA	N/A
<b># of Children</b>	1	3	4	2	2	2	0	0
<b>Country where children live</b>	USA	USA	USA	USA	USA	Mexico	N/A	N/A
<b>Highest education level completed</b>	University	6 <sup>th</sup> grade	12 <sup>th</sup> grade	Technical School	12 <sup>th</sup> grade	12 <sup>th</sup> grade	9 <sup>th</sup> grade	12 <sup>th</sup> grade
<b>Housing (Rent, Own, Homeless)</b>	Own	Rent	Rent	Own	Own	Rent	Rent	Rent
<b>Living with</b>	Child	Husband & children	Husband & children	Spouse & children	Spouse & children	Wife	Fiancé	Alone

**APPENDIX K**  
**MANUSCRIPT**

## **BEING UNDOCUMENTED IN THE UNITED STATES: THE IMPACT ON MEXICAN IMMIGRANTS' MENTAL HEALTH**

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this qualitative study was twofold: (a) to obtain a deep understanding of the phenomenon of being undocumented in the United States based on undocumented Mexican immigrants' experiences and perceptions and (b) to identify how immigrants' mental health was impacted by the phenomenon. A phenomenological research design was employed in this study and saturation was reached after a total of eight participants were interviewed. Several common themes emerged that described the participants' experiences in varying aspects of their lives: low wages; guilt; fear of driving; financial difficulties; social isolation; limitations exclusive to undocumented immigrants such as limited access to healthcare, no higher education opportunities, limited employment opportunities; feeling invisible in the U.S. culture; legal problems related to immigration; a psychological impact including psychological distress, stress, lacking in self-confidence, feeling of disillusionment, cultural adjustment difficulties, tolerating injustices; seeing more opportunities than in Mexico. Participants also provided recommendations for mental health professionals in working with undocumented Mexican immigrants. The findings of this study supported the speculation that if an immigrant has an undocumented legal status, he or she might be at risk of experiencing higher acculturative stress and poorer mental health than immigrants with documented legal status. Furthermore, additional information in the area of multicultural competencies for counseling psychologists may be gained through obtaining a more in-depth understanding of the lives and challenges of undocumented Mexican

immigrants. Through such understanding and knowledge of the experiences of undocumented Mexican immigrants, a broader context into the lives of this population could be obtained and empathic insights, in turn, might develop toward them.

*Keywords:* qualitative study, phenomenological study, undocumented immigrants, Mexican immigrants, mental health

### **Introduction**

With the uncertainty of what lies ahead, many risk their lives in hopes of a better life--if not for themselves, at least for their loved ones. Some view the journey as temporary, while others know there is no turning back. Moving to a new city or state can be challenging for the average American but one will eventually adapt and be comfortable in one's new home. Yet, the undocumented immigrant knows he or she cannot be fully comfortable in this new world. That individual must live in the shadows and in constant vigilance for this person knows he or she does not belong. How can this individual belong if he or she does not exist?

According to the Department of Homeland Security (2010), an approximated 10.8 million undocumented immigrants reside in the United States with 62% of those having originated from Mexico. While immigrants in general face challenges such as acculturative stress, undocumented immigrants might be faced with additional stressors related to their legal status. The American Psychological Association (APA; 2012) Presidential Task Force on Immigration launched by former APA president, Melba J. T. Vasquez, sought to determine "the psychological factors related to the immigration experience" and recognized undocumented immigrants and their children as a group of people who face "unique challenges" due to their legal status (p. v).



Given the scarcity of literature focused on undocumented Mexican immigrants and their mental health, this study sought to obtain rich information that would provide readers with an accurate understanding of what it is like to be an undocumented Mexican immigrant in the United States. Additionally, this study intended to provide further insight into the unique struggles undocumented Mexican immigrants face in the United States and better understand how their experiences might impact their psychological well-being.

## **Literature Review**

### **Factors Impacting Undocumented Immigrants' Mental Health**

**Immigrant distress.** Migration typically causes a disruption of lifelong attachments (e.g., family, friends, and culture) and displacement from established values (Falicov, 2005). The changes caused by migration can create different types of psychological distress such as psychosomatic symptoms (e.g., insomnia, dizziness, palpitations; Falicov, 2005), depression and anxiety (Warheit, Vega, Auth, & Meinhardt, 1985), social alienation, psychological conflict, marginality (Grinberg & Grinberg, 1989; Shuval, 1982); and culture shock (Falicov, 2005).

In addition to the challenges undocumented immigrants might encounter while crossing U.S. borders, the added challenge of acculturating to a new country and culture might also create stress. Among the many barriers immigrants face adjusting to U.S. culture are discrimination (Perreira, Chapman, & Stein, 2006; Perrilla, Wilson, & Wold, 1998; Shinnar, 2007), not speaking the English language (Burgos, 2002; Dale et al., 2005; Perreira et al., 2006; Perrilla et al., 1998; Shinnar, 2007), financial difficulties (Dalla, Gupta, Lopez, & Jones, 2006), separation from family members who stayed in the

country of origin (Alderete, Vega, Kolody, & Aguilar-Gaziola, 1999; Grzywacz, Quandt, Arcury, & Marin, 2005; Grzywacz et al., 2006; Magaña & Hovey, 2003; Perreira et al., 2006), and strain in their family roles (Burgos, 2002; Dalla et al., 2006; Hirsch, 1999). While the processes of acculturation and immigration are believed to be stressful experiences impacting immigrants' psychological well-being, it might be that only particular events occurring throughout these processes actually increase the possibility of developing mental health problems (Liebkind & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2000). Feeling isolated, experiencing discrimination as a result of not speaking the language of the host country, and having a history of trauma appear to place an immigrant at risk for experiencing mental health problems (Canadian Task Force; Liebkind, as cited in Liebkind & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2000).

**Lack of family support.** Mexican Americans hold family values in high regard (Falicov, 2005). Families might include a variety of family members such as grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles, and never married, widowed, or divorced individuals (Falicov, 2005). Families might be extended, nuclear, or single-parented (Falicov, 2005). Ties among family members, including third and fourth cousins, are often strong, particularly among siblings (Falicov, 2005). Relationships such as that of the child and parent are especially valued in Mexican culture and, when combined with the value for respect toward parents, might have precedence over the relationship between husband and wife (Falicov, 2005). Families might provide for extended family members companionship, sharing of financial responsibility, problem solving, and sharing of raising children--a concept known as familismo (Falicov, 2005). Hence, having the support of family is crucial as Mexican Americans are more likely to turn to

family than outsiders when in need (Falicov, 2005). Based on the interdependence between Mexican family members, it is important to consider that undocumented Mexican immigrants who leave their families in Mexico might experience great challenges in a country where they lack the family support they are accustomed to receiving.

**Legal status as a barrier to health care.** Undocumented parents might resist seeking mental health services for many reasons (Breton & Ocegüera, 2008). Fear as a barrier to seeking health care was identified among a sample of undocumented Latino adults (Berk & Schur, 2001). In a sample of 756 participants from Texas and California, 39% reported that they feared denial of health care due to their legal status in the country. (Berk & Schur, 2001). When a professional is able to reach a family to recommend services, some parents might withhold important information to the mental health provider for fear of being reported to immigration (Breton & Ocegüera, 2008). Others might be hesitant to attend a mental health clinic because they are unaware of the services available to them (Breton & Ocegüera, 2008). Some might be unaware that services might be available in their native language (Breton & Ocegüera, 2008). Another common barrier might be the parents hold two jobs to sustain their families and are unable to take time off work to attend therapy (Breton & Ocegüera, 2008).

**Discrimination.** One of the various factors of distress among immigrants is racial discrimination (Mak & Nesdale, 2001). Higher levels of psychological distress were found among those first-generation Chinese Australian migrants who perceived having been racially discriminated against (Mak & Nesdale, 2001). In the same study, migrants who possessed sufficient internal (e.g., generalized self-efficacy, self-esteem,

and self-assessed English fluency) and external (e.g., number of friends) coping resources were less likely to show higher levels of psychological distress (Mak & Nesdale, 2001). These results direct our attention to the significance of identifying stressors for migrant distress as well as of having adequate coping resources available to them (Mak & Nesdale, 2001).

**Acculturative stress.** The studies referenced previously are connected to a phenomenon now known as acculturative stress. To better understand acculturative stress, attention must be paid to a notion known as acculturation. Acculturation is a term used to describe the changes members of a particular culture experience when they come in contact with a culture different from their own and result in further changes to the cultural patterns in either culture (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936). Acculturative experiences vary from person to person (Williams & Berry, 1991). Thus, an individual's acculturative process will differ from that of another individual (Williams & Berry, 1991). Acculturative stress has its source in the acculturation process and might be manifested in a variety of ways such as feelings of depression, anxiety, alienation, psychosomatic symptoms, or identity confusion (Berry, Kim, Minde, & Mok, 1987). Thus, acculturative stress might have a negative impact in the well-being of individuals (Williams & Berry, 1991).

Two major variables were identified in one model of acculturative stress: acculturation experience and stressors (Berry et al., 1987). The relationship between acculturation experience and stressors results in high or low levels of acculturative stress (Berry et al., 1987). Within the same model, several factors affect the relationship between acculturation and stress: (a) nature of the larger society, (b) type of acculturating

group, (c) modes of acculturation, (d) psychological characteristics of the person, and (e) demographic and social characteristics of the person. The interaction between all five factors and the acculturation process can result in high or low levels of acculturative stress for the individual (Berry et al., 1987).

An extension to Berry et al.'s (1987) acculturative stress model was made to include the consequences of elevated levels of acculturative stress (Hovey & King, 1997). In their model, Hovey and King (1997) suggested that "individuals who experience elevated levels of acculturative stress may be at risk for the development of depression and suicidal ideation" (p. 137). The notion that people experiencing high levels of acculturative stress could develop depression and suicidal ideation was also supported by several other studies (Hovey, 2000a, 2000b; Hovey & King, 1996; Hovey & Magaña, 2002).

### **Statement of Purpose**

One of the purposes of this study was to provide readers with an understanding of what it is like to be an undocumented Mexican immigrant in the United States based on undocumented Mexican immigrants' experiences and perceptions. Another purpose was to allow an opportunity to gain insight into the types of challenges undocumented Mexican immigrants face in the United States. A final purpose was to provide insight into the manner in which such experiences, perceptions, and challenges might impact undocumented Mexican immigrants' psychological well-being.

### **Participants**

A total of eight individuals participated in this study. Participants for the current study were recruited in a rural area in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States.

To qualify for participation in the current study, each participant met the following criteria: at least 18 years of age, of Mexican origin, an undocumented immigrant, and he or she had lived in the United States for at least six months. In the event participants lived in the United States multiple times, he or she had to have previously lived in the United States for at least six months.

## **Procedures**

### **Participant Recruitment**

Participants from a Rocky Mountain region of the United States were recruited through network sampling. I let my own acquaintances know of the current study and recruited participants referred by those acquaintances. Some participants were referred by other participants.

### **Method for Collection of Information**

A single, in-depth, semi-structured interview (Merriam, 1998) lasting no more than 90 minutes was conducted with each participant. Each interview was digitally recorded and fully transcribed by the researcher. Consistent with characteristics of a semi-structured interview in which specific information is sought from each participant, the interview was guided by questions related to the issue being explored--the experience of being an undocumented immigrant (Merriam, 1998).

### **Procedures**

Permission was obtained from each participant by using an Informed Consent Form. The Informed Consent Form was explained in detail in Spanish based upon the language preference of each participant and a copy was provided to each. For the purpose of protecting their identities, a verbal consent from the participant was obtained.

Participants were made aware of their choice to decline participation at any time. Additionally, they were informed that a \$30.00 compensation would be provided to them upon completion of the interview. Prior to beginning the interview, I asked participants to select a pseudonym as an additional measure to help ensure confidentiality. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by me. The recordings were transferred onto a digital memory storage device, deleted from the digital recorder, and the storage device kept in a locked cabinet. Each recording on the storage device was then destroyed one year after the date of the interview.

Basic demographic information was collected to obtain a more complete understanding of participants' experiences and background. During the interview, participants were asked to describe their experiences as undocumented immigrants in the United States. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions. The wording of the questions was not predetermined in an effort to allow for new ideas and a more flexible exploration of the topic at hand (Merriam, 1998). Examples of the questions included (a) Please tell me what it has been like for you to live in the United States as an undocumented immigrant and (b) Do you regret your decision of immigrating to the United States?

### **Trustworthiness**

The current study demonstrated trustworthiness by establishing measures of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. To enhance credibility of the current study, I engaged in researcher reflexivity, triangulation, and provided thick descriptions and peer debriefing. I engaged in researcher reflexivity by maintaining a digital self-reflective journal from the beginning to the end of the study (Morrow, 2007).

Throughout the data analysis process, I also engaged in triangulation to strengthen the credibility of the current study. I utilized source, researcher, and theory triangulation.

Transferability in the current study was established by providing the reader with thick descriptions, sufficient information about me, the context in which the study took place, the processes, the participants in the study, and the relationship between each participant and me. To establish dependability in the current study, I kept an audit trail. The audit trail method was also used to enhance the confirmability of the current study by engaging in researcher reflexivity through a digital self-reflective journal.

### **Results**

The shared experiences of the participants in this study were reflected in the emerging themes and helped describe the phenomenon of being an undocumented Mexican immigrant in the United States. The experiences reported by all participants were social isolation, fear, and separation from their families of origin, which seem to point to an overarching sense of loss. Social isolation was a common experience among all participants in this study. This finding was not surprising because undocumented Mexican immigrants are among a group of individuals whose culture typically fosters a sense of family interdependence (Falicov, 2005). Unlike other individuals in Hispanic cultures, participants in this study did not have immediate access to their families of origin who provided an important part of their socialization. Without the option of visiting their families or having their families visit them, participants were left with telephone and in some cases online social networks as the only means to maintain contact with their families. For other participants, making friends was perceived as a potential risk of deportation because it oftentimes meant having to drive to friends' homes or other



places in order to maintain contact or participate in social activities. Therefore, many participants sacrificed socialization opportunities out of fear.

All undocumented Mexican immigrants in this study reported fear of being detained by police officers and eventually deported back to Mexico. For some participants, the fear might be better described as terror because being deported back to Mexico oftentimes meant returning to an unsafe place to live where participants' lives might be at risk. The fear of being deported is a common theme found among undocumented and documented Latino immigrants (Arbona et al., 2010). While the complete extent to which fear impacts undocumented Mexican immigrants is unknown, the findings in this study suggested that familial and social areas of functioning were impacted. Other studies conducted with documented and undocumented immigrants suggested that the constant fear of deportation puts their emotional well-being and physical health at risk (Cavazos-Rehg, Zayas, & Spitznagel, 2007). Moreover, Berk and Schur (2001) identified fear among undocumented Latino immigrants as a barrier for them to access care. Still other studies indicated that individuals who experienced fear of other things, such as fear of crime, also limited the frequency with which they utilized health promoting services and engaged in social activities (Stafford, Chandola, & Marmot, 2007; Whitley & Prince, 2005). The same studies also found that fear had a negative effect on individuals' overall mental health (Stafford et al., 2007; Whitley & Prince, 2005). Stafford et al. (2007) indicated that participants with higher levels of fear of crime tended to be less physically active and were more likely to have depression than those who had lower levels of fear of crime. Thus, the recurring fear experienced by

undocumented Mexican immigrants seemed to place them in a vulnerable position to suffer mental health problems and negatively affected their social and daily functioning.

Being separated from their families of origin was another phenomenon experienced by all participants, which caused psychological distress for them. For some participants, the separation elicited feelings of regret, disappointment, sadness, and loneliness. Other participants, such as Luis, described immense suffering as a result of being separated from their families of origin. Lamentably, for participants in this study the difficulty of dealing with the separation was prolonged for an unknown period of time because the separation was rarely temporary. Thus, it seemed that undocumented Mexican immigrants must pay the high price of being separated from their families for an indefinite period of time if they choose to remain in the United States. The prolonged separation consequently exposes undocumented Mexican immigrants to chronic feelings of distress, which could have an overall negative effect on their psychological well-being. Similar findings were reported by Savic, Chur-Hansen, Mahmood, & Moore (2013) whose study showed that Sudanese refugees' mental health was negatively impacted by being separated from their families. In addition to the difficulties mentioned, undocumented Mexican immigrants' well-being might be impacted in other harmful ways such as through discord in relationships with members of their families of origin as well as difficulty adjusting to U.S. culture (Alderete et al., 1999; Black, 2005; Grzywacz et al., 2005, 2006; Magaña & Hovey, 2003; Perreira et al., 2006).

When identifying the ways in which the experiences of undocumented Mexican immigrants might impact their mental health, attention must be directed at the emerging themes derived from this study. While this study did not formally assess the presence of

any specific psychological disorder through the use of measurement instruments, distressing symptoms potentially signaling the presence of mental health problems were reported by participants. Experiences with ongoing anxiety in the form of immense fear of being deported or fear of driving were most pronounced among participants in this study. Other distressing symptoms reported by participants included feelings of frustration; feelings of disillusionment; feelings of regret; feelings of guilt, stress, and low self-esteem; and feelings of worthlessness. When asked directly, all except one of the participants acknowledged his or her psychological health had been impacted by the ongoing fear experienced, continued stress, or being separated from his or her family of origin. All in all, the findings in this study indicated that undocumented Mexican immigrants' mental health was adversely impacted by their experiences related to having an undocumented legal status. This finding supported Joseph's (2011) findings with undocumented Brazilian immigrants where a lower quality of life and an overall negative impact on mental health were identified following numerous stressors experienced related to their legal status. Similar to the findings in this study, Joseph found that the lives of undocumented Brazilian immigrants were negatively affected by experiences of discrimination, separation from their families, and ongoing anxiety manifested through worry and fear of being deported.

Other themes that emerged were also relevant to the mental health of the participants in this study and possibly other undocumented immigrants. Employment, socioeconomic status, and education levels were identified by Williams and Berry (1991) as contributing factors to increased levels of acculturative stress for an immigrant. Participants in this study experienced specific challenges when faced with limited options

for employment and housing. When employment was found, the wages tended to be lower and consequently led to a lower socioeconomic status and more limitations on housing options. Additionally, participants found limited or no access to higher education and limited access to health care. Such challenges are considered unique to the experiences of undocumented Mexican immigrants because the limitations mentioned are directly related to their legal status. Therefore, it is suggested that legal status is a demographic and social characteristic of an immigrant and, due to the added challenges imposed on an undocumented immigrant, also a contributing factor to acculturative stress. Williams and Berry suggested that acculturative stress negatively impacts the well-being of individuals, thus making undocumented Mexican immigrants susceptible to this risk.

Additional distressing experiences among undocumented Mexican immigrants in this study included perceived discrimination or unfair treatment. Some participants experienced discrimination at work through earning lower wages than would be earned by a documented individual performing the same duties. Others perceived discrimination in their children's schools or in their communities. In general, undocumented Mexican immigrants in this study had the perception of being invisible and having to live "in the shadows" in U.S. culture. Although the objective of this study did not involve measuring the extent to which perceived discrimination impacted the mental health of participants, research told us that an individual's experiences with perceived discrimination or unfair treatment can have *harmful* (emphasis added) effects on his or her mental and physical health (Liebkind & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2000; Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009). Perceived discrimination was linked to increased negative behaviors, stress responses of

physiological and psychological nature, and an overall lower involvement in healthy behaviors (Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009).

## **Implications**

### **Theoretical**

Previous literature on Hispanic or Latino immigrants, both documented and undocumented, has placed greater emphasis on cultural adjustment and acculturative stress among immigrants (Arbona et al., 2010; Berry et al., 1987; Hovey, 2000a, 2000b; Hovey & King, 1996). The findings from this study indicating that participants experienced psychological distress manifested as chronic anxiety for fear of being deported among other experiences suggested that the legal status of an undocumented Mexican immigrant in the United States could be considered a demographic and social characteristic of an immigrant. As such, the quality of being undocumented would contribute to the five factors identified by Berry et al.'s (1987) model of acculturative stress. Although acculturative stress levels were not directly measured in this study, it could be concluded that undocumented Mexican immigrants in this study might be experiencing higher levels of acculturative stress that, in turn, could negatively influence their mental health through manifestations of anxiety, isolation, and other distressing feelings.

Despite the challenges faced by undocumented Mexican immigrants as a disenfranchised group in U.S. society, they have little hope of legalizing their status or being provided with benefits such as authorization to work legally in the United States. For this reason, I would like to propose that the findings of this study also serve to promote social justice for this marginalized group of individuals and, starting with mental

health professionals, help others begin to see undocumented immigrants as human beings and not as criminals or “illegals.”

Such a task, I believe, could be accomplished through applying the Social Empathy model (Domokos-Cheng Ham, 2014; Segal, 2011). The Social Empathy model draws from social responsibility theory, which suggests that “individuals or organizations have an obligation to act to benefit society at large” (Domokos-Cheng Ham, 2014, p. 17). Social empathy might be described as a broader concept that encompasses “(a) individual empathy; (b) sociocultural, economic, and historical contexts; and (c) social responsibility” (Domokos-Cheng Ham, 2014, p. 17) and serves as a framework to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of a group of people. In this new model, Segal (2011) suggested that through applying empathy to social systems, people are compelled to behave in ways that encourage social justice.

It is my belief that through gaining a deeper understanding and knowledge of the experiences of undocumented Mexican immigrants, a broader context into the lives of this population could be obtained and empathic insights, in turn, might develop toward this oppressed and in many ways invisible group. Segal (2011) suggested that by interviewing participants so they tell their stories, researchers bear witness to those stories and as a result help bring about social change. This study contributed to this process by providing a space for participants to tell their stories. Furthermore, the reader and I have also contributed to this process by bearing witness to those stories.

### **Methodological**

The current study was a qualitative study guided by a constructivist paradigm in which the nature of reality was comprised of several yet equally valid realities

(Ponterotto, 2005). Additionally, a phenomenological research design was employed to help answer one of the research questions (i.e., what is it like to be an undocumented Mexican immigrant as determined by undocumented Mexican immigrants' experiences and perceptions?). The constructivist paradigm was especially relevant in this topic because the experiences of several different undocumented Mexican immigrants were considered and were equally important despite their similarities and differences. Through a phenomenological design, this study was able to attain the goal of deeply understanding the common experiences and perceptions of the participants and, as a result of the new understanding, also understand ways in which participants' mental health had been impacted. In conclusion, the methodology employed in this study was a strength because it helped answer both research questions.

Although it was established that participants' mental health was impacted by their experiences as undocumented Mexican immigrants in the United States, the reader might wonder the extent to which participants' mental health was impacted. To further clarify this question, future research involving quantitative approaches might employ the use of psychological instruments such as self-report questionnaires to identify psychological symptoms and their severity. Furthermore, quantitative approaches might be useful in comparing larger samples and possibly identifying sub-groups among undocumented Mexican immigrants in an effort to clarify their mental health needs. For example, undocumented Mexican immigrants living near the border with Mexico might be experiencing higher levels of distress if the presence of immigration officials was more pronounced in those areas.

Longitudinal studies, both qualitative and quantitative in nature, would also be necessary to identify any changes in undocumented Mexican immigrants' mental health as well as potentially discovering influencing factors. For example, for undocumented Mexican immigrants living in U.S. states where the percentage of Hispanic or Latino population is lower, when compared to other states in the country, might potentially add to undocumented Mexican immigrants' sense of isolation. Additionally, it would be helpful to know if an undocumented Mexican immigrant's perceptions changed significantly as time passed or if their experiences continued.

### **Clinical**

By providing a more in-depth understanding of the lives of undocumented Mexican immigrants, counseling psychologists might have an increased understanding of these immigrants' challenges. One such challenge mentioned previously was the constant threat of being detained by police officers and eventually returned to Mexico. It is important to understand that such a threat is real; in 2010, 73% of those individuals removed from the United States were of Mexican origin (Department of Homeland Security, 2011). Counseling psychologists might aim their clinical interventions at helping undocumented clients enhance their coping skills to manage chronic anxiety and stress based on an actual threat.

Perceived discrimination and mistreatment in their places of employment was also an issue discussed by participants in this study. It might serve well for counseling psychologists to be informed about undocumented immigrants' rights in order to help empower their clients throughout the process of treatment. Specifically, learning about labor laws and their applicability for undocumented workers or an undocumented



immigrant's rights if detained could help mental health clinicians distinguish between perceived and real risks for their undocumented clients. Counseling psychologists might ultimately become advocates for undocumented immigrant clients by helping them seek resources to become knowledgeable about their legal rights. As a result, counseling psychologists' efforts might serve to help undocumented clients manage their anxieties and fears and possibly gain greater self-confidence. One participant in this study suggested that mental health practitioners be encouraging to undocumented immigrants in an effort to help keep their spirits high. Given that participants in this study expressed a desire to succeed and help their families, mental health professionals would do well to utilize undocumented Mexican immigrants' desire to provide for their families as a means of enhancing motivation. In turn, undocumented clients might feel encouraged to continue pushing forward.

Findings in this study also suggested that undocumented immigrants might not seek mental health services either for fear of exposing their legal status or due to a lack of knowledge about the resources available to them. One participant suggested that mental health professionals step into the community and approach immigrants to offer help because it was unlikely undocumented immigrants would seek services. In this regard, mental health practitioners are encouraged to network with places such as public low cost medical clinics in their respective communities where minority populations, such as undocumented immigrants, are likely to be served. The purpose of this networking attempt would be to gain access to the undocumented population and offer mental health services. Additionally, seeking undocumented clients might help lessen their feelings of invisibility and instead convey the message that others are concerned about them.

Some participants anticipated challenges in their children's academic future following high school graduation or upon knowing they are undocumented. When working with families, mental health practitioners, including school counselors, might do well in reading literature about undocumented youth to better understand the struggles specific to that population such as difficulty with forming their identities and feelings of isolation (Gonzales, Suarez-Orozco, & Dedios-Sanguinetti, 2013). When working with parents of those youth, facilitating an open discussion about the reasons behind immigrating, whether or not the family plans to return to their country of origin, and actively planning for the children's futures, such as through looking for resources, might be helpful for all involved.

Previous literature on working with Latino families in therapy would also be applicable in working with undocumented immigrants. When working with undocumented clients, it is recommended that clients be assigned to a therapist who can speak their native language in order to successfully collect the family history during the initial assessment (Breton & Ocegüera, 2008). The therapist does not need to be of the same ethnic background as the clients; yet it is essential that the therapist understand the presenting problems and be culturally sensitive (Falicov, 1998). For a mental health therapist to build a relationship with an undocumented client, it is critical he or she emphasizes that the client's legal status will not be disclosed (Breton & Ocegüera, 2008). Counseling psychologists should take into consideration the findings of this study--that undocumented Mexican immigrants experience chronic fear and worry about being found out and deported. Additional precautions in the form of explaining the limits of confidentiality might be taken such as who may have access to the client's identifiable

information and whether or not immigration status could be revealed. Asking for detailed information about the clients' immigration stories might also be appropriate because treatment could be linked to the clients' immigration experiences (Breton & Ocegüera, 2008). For example, a therapist might find that a client presenting with post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms was sexually abused or extorted while crossing to the United States (Breton & Ocegüera, 2008). Given the vast number of factors involved in the experiences of undocumented immigrants, clinicians might find that conducting a detailed intake interview with this population could provide him or her with crucial information to deeply understand the presenting concerns and develop the most appropriate and sensitive treatment plans.

Based on the limited financial resources as a result of scarce employment options for undocumented Mexican immigrants, mental health services might be difficult to access due to financial limitations. Mental health professionals might consider more economical ways of delivering services to undocumented clients. One idea would be to provide group therapy as a therapeutic intervention and modality. Considering that social isolation was a common theme among participants in this study, a group modality might provide a dual benefit for undocumented clients.

The findings of this study might provide additional information in the area of multicultural competencies for counseling psychologists. Specifically, this study provided a deeper understanding of the experiences, including challenges, of adult, undocumented Mexican immigrants in the United States. Such information might be employed in applied psychological practices such as therapy interventions; it might be useful to other professionals such as those in healthcare professions including physicians

and nurses as well as other helping professions such as social workers and teachers who are likely to come into contact with undocumented immigrants.. Additionally, it might help enhance empathy toward the undocumented Mexican immigrant population and result in more effective treatment.

### **Limitations**

A potential limitation of this study was the data were collected in Spanish and the results were presented in English. The reason the data were collected in Spanish is because Spanish is the native language of the participants. The data were also analyzed in Spanish, themes derived in English, and the only translations were those of quotes derived from the transcripts. To reduce the potential for misinterpretation, where it was feasible, I provided quotes in the original language immediately followed by their English translations. Despite my attempts at providing as clear and accurate representations of the experiences of each participant as possible, the reader must rely on the translations and interpretations provided by me. Additionally, the reader should consider that the results presented were undoubtedly my interpretations. It is possible that my own biases might have influenced the interpretation of the findings even though I attempted to be as transparent as I could.

Related to the impact on the mental health of the participants in this study was the fact that little information about participants' previous mental health history, including a history of trauma or substance abuse, was gathered. Therefore, it is unknown whether the difficulty some participants reported in adjusting to U.S. culture might have been related to previous mental health concerns. Future research with this population might focus on

gathering more extensive background information to assess for the presence of risk factors present prior to immigrating to the United States.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Some people might admire the courage of undocumented Mexican immigrants to leave behind their families, friends, and the only life they knew in hopes of finding something better. Some might consider such a decision to be an enormous leap of faith or an act of love, while still others might refer to it as foolish or unnecessary. Everyone has personal beliefs and opinions about *illegal immigration* (emphasis added) but few will truly understand the motives behind this act and the driving forces that push an undocumented immigrant to risk it all. Perhaps even fewer will have an accurate understanding of what it is like to live in an undocumented Mexican immigrant's shoes, much less the valor it must take to make the decision each day to continue living in the shadows knowing that he or she does not belong.

I would like to end this study by quoting one of the participants, Sarai:

Uno se tiene que hacer fuerte y hacerse a la idea de que uno tomo esa decisión sabiendo que no los tenemos [papeles]. Quizá la tomamos porque sabemos que allá no había una vida para nosotros, estaba mejor acá. Pero también sabemos eso, que no somos de este país (*One has to be strong and get used to the idea that one made the decision knowing that one did not have them [papers]. Maybe we made it [the decision] because we know that there was not life for us back there [Mexico], that it was better here [U.S.]. But we also know it, that we are not from this country*).

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