

Expanding Our Borders: Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology's Special Issue on Immigration

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The report of the American Psychological Association (APA) Presidential Task Force on Immigration (2012) calls for the field of psychology to consider immigrant-origin populations in research agendas to inform practice and policy. The Task Force summarized the existing literature regarding the overall psychological well-being of immigrants in the United States. One goal of the report was to summarize the existing literature and identify ways in which psychological research can inform public policy. A second goal was to identify weaknesses in the literature to identify needed research. In surveying the literature, the Task Force found that there were several empirical limitations that impede a clear understanding of the experiences of immigrants. Thus, the Task Force report calls into question the scope of evidence when research questions have been framed without keeping immigrant populations in mind, when the research tools used have not been culturally sensitive, and when the research has not been clear on who is and is not included when immigrants are studied (APA, 2012).

In many cases, immigration status or generation has not been considered by researchers or has been included as a control variable. Because of that, however, race, ethnicity, and immigration status are often confounded, overlooking that these are unique constructs that may represent different experiences. Researchers may not ask about immigration status to maintain the confidence of research participants who are uncomfortable disclosing this information. The Task Force was often forced to extrapolate to immigrant populations from either cross-cultural research or cultural research based on the host nation dynamics. Asian immigrants (broadly defined), for instance, differ in systematic ways from Asian Americans (broadly defined), and even once one focuses on one of these specified groups, differences remain. Immigrant communities are diverse, and therefore factors such as immigrant generation, gender, sexual orientation, religion, disability, and socioeconomic status, should be examined to have a more inclusive understanding of the immigrant experience. Moreover,

immigration status can produce stressors that interact in unique ways to produce new outcomes not easily predicted from a purely cultural perspective. For example, one might predict that cultures that are generally more interdependent face unique stressors when they are isolated due to immigration (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). It is further unknown how those cultural variables interact with dynamics that prohibit health seeking, especially when one fears being deported or becoming separated from family or when resources are hard to identify. The unique combination of migration, acculturative, and family stressors can affect the mental and behavioral health of immigrant families beyond known cultural differences. Thus, research regarding immigrant populations requires going beyond extrapolating from cultural studies.

The Task Force report identifies many other voids in the literature. Most of the current literature is cross-sectional in nature. Longitudinal research can help disentangle multiple contradictions in the literature. However, longitudinal research often requires funding, and one might postulate that funding is low to study immigrant well-being. Longitudinal research might help explain why assimilation produces more positive outcomes with some groups, but less positive outcomes with other groups. Moreover, the research is almost always geared toward understanding the stressors of immigration. The Task Force identified very few unique culture specific definitions of well-being, nor does the research often identify the unique strengths and coping strategies of each group. These are not trivial questions but are central to the psychological well-being of the immigrant populations, yet they are rarely studied.

With this in mind, *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* issued a call for manuscripts on the topic of immigration. The manuscripts in the Special Issue highlight important within group differences often overlooked when immigrants are conceptualized as a homogeneous group. For example, Chang, Natsuaki, and Chen (2013) have found differences in family cohesion and family cultural conflict between first, second, and third generation Latinos and Asian Americans. Nakamura, Chan, and Fischer (2013) also focus on diversity within immigrant communities by considering the experiences of Asian Canadian men who have sex with men (MSM), and found that first generation Asian Canadian MSM reported feeling less connected to their ethnic community compared with second generation Asian Canadian MSM.

The Task Force Report used an ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) to understand the contexts in which immigrants

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reside and encourages researchers to examine these various contexts to inform the field (APA, 2012). The attention to microsystemic and macrosystemic factors in the lives of immigrants is of particular importance as such inquiry is essential to both intervention and policy. The research regarding attitudes toward immigrants, however, often demonstrates bias but sometimes does a relatively poor job of identifying why some attitudes exist. There is also very little research on how immigrants cope with discrimination. Given their often vulnerable status, many individuals might be forced to accept severe forms of interpersonal and workplace discrimination, and we found very little research on how individuals cope with those stressors or anything regarding the long-term consequences of those stressors. There is strikingly little research about workplace stressors and interactions in the workplace. Ojeda and Piña-Watson (2013) investigate stressors related to workplace discrimination, but beyond that one study, there is still very little about how well immigrants adjust to different types of workplaces. Given the fear that immigrants are “stealing jobs,” it is surprising how little research exists regarding workplace interactions. Relatedly, Reyna, Dobria, and Wetherell (2013) examine the nuanced nature of stereotypes about Chinese, Arab, Mexican, Polish, and Canadian immigrant groups and how they relate to ambivalent attitudes toward immigrant groups.

The articles included in the Special Issue consider a variety of microsystems, such as educational settings (Tummala-Narra & Claudius, 2013), ethnic and gay communities (Nakamura, Chan, & Fischer, 2013), and communities with anti-immigration laws (Valdez, Valentine, & Padilla, 2013). In addition, the influence of the macrosystem was examined by a number of authors (Mukherjee, Adams, & Molina, 2013; Murray & Marx, 2013; Ojeda & Piña-Watson, 2013; Tummala-Narra & Claudius, 2013), who address stereotypes and discrimination toward immigrants. Wiley, Lawrence, Figueroa, and Percontino (2013) further demonstrate how these macrosystem forces impact immigrants’ political engagement. As an extension of research on prejudicial attitudes toward immigrants, Murray and Marx (2013) examine how young adults’ attitudes toward authorized and unauthorized immigrants and refugees.

To improve the validity and cultural significance of the psychological literature on immigration, various methodological approaches have been recommended, including qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods (APA, 2012). This Special Issue recognizes the need for a variety of methodologies in research with immigrant communities. For example, McWhirter, Ramos, and Medina (2013) in a survey study of 475 Latina/o high school students found that students who anticipated immigration status problems had lower vocational outcome expectations and anticipated more external barriers to pursuing their postsecondary plans. Valdez, Valentine, and Padilla (2013) utilized focus groups with Mexican immigrant parents to explore motivations shaping immigrants’ intentions to stay in Arizona after passage of Senate Bill 1070 in 2010, one of the most restrictive immigration policies in recent decades. David and Nadal (2013) provide findings from their mixed method study on Filipino American immigrants to understand the impact of colonialism on mental health.

The APA Task Force Report also raised the issue of sampling as a concern for research on immigration stating that research should not focus solely on clinical samples (APA, 2012). The overreliance on clinical samples might inadvertently produce an overestimate of

pathology and fail to identify the strengths a group can bring to the situation. None of the manuscripts in this special issue use clinical samples. In fact, Chang, Natsuaki, and Chen (2013) present data from the National Latino and Asian American Study, which utilized stratified probability sampling to recruit a nationally representative sample of Latinos and Asian Americans. Other samples include high school students (McWhirter, Ramos, & Medina, 2013; Tummala-Narra & Claudius, 2013) and day laborers (Ojeda & Piña-Watson, 2013).

Another important methodological issue concerns the need for valid and culturally meaningful assessment of mental health constructs in order to understand how different cultural groups view well-being and distress (APA, 2012). Ojeda and Piña-Watson (2013) examine the role of familismo, spirituality, work satisfaction, perceived health, and perceived discrimination on life satisfaction. David and Nadal (2013) consider the role of colonial mentality on mental health of Filipino American immigrants. Both studies examine unique cultural constructs that reflect the experiences of these immigrant populations. As a science, however, it may be impossible to fully and properly validate each measure used in every context with the varied immigrant groups across the country. That further highlights the need to train researchers in a culturally sensitive manner so that at the very least, clinicians and researchers are using the various scales skillfully.

Despite the vital contributions made by the authors of the articles in this Special Issue, important gaps remain in research on immigration. The articles included in this Special Issue are cross-sectional, which reflects much of the existing immigration literature. There is a need for longitudinal research, which can help us to better understand how immigrants adapt over time (APA, 2012). There are several areas of concern to immigrant communities that require increased attention in research, such as the effects of unauthorized status on psychological well-being, including differences and similarities in the experiences of immigrants with legal status and those with unauthorized status. The articles in the Special Issue also draw attention to the limited research on intersections of identity among immigrant populations. Specifically, psychological research should focus on the experiences of those who may identify with multiple marginalized communities, including ethnic and racial minorities, multiracial immigrants, women, LGBT immigrants, low-income individuals, and immigrants with disabilities. This Special Issue is a reflection of the emerging research concerning these various issues, and a call for more in-depth understandings of ecologically informed and culturally responsive research, intervention, and policy with immigrant-origin populations.

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