The Experience of Migration: A Relational Approach in Therapy

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Introduction
Psychological theorists have amply emphasized the importance of attachment figures and significant relationships as well as that of the social and cultural context in shaping psychological development and emotional well being (Bowlby, 1982; Kegan, 1982; Miller, 1986). They stress the deleterious effects of early separations from significant figures (Bowlby, 1973; 1980; 1982); symptoms of depression and sadness in women when experiencing disconnections from significant relationships (Miller, 1986; Stiver & Miller, 1988); and the emotional impact of losing one's cultural and social context (Sluzki, 1979; Grinberg & Grinberg, 1989; Espin, 1992; Brody, 1994). These are factors confronted by most immigrants and illustrated in the following vignette.

Vignette 1: Rosa
When Rosa was 25 years old, her husband was killed in a car accident. With the loss of her husband she also lost social status and access to opportunities previously available to her and her children, ranging in ages 2 to 7. Her wages as an executive secretary in Mexico were not enough to support her children and herself. Her only hope for the future, it seemed, was to emigrate illegally. She packed her bags with dreams of opportunities that would enable her within a short time to return home to her children with enough savings to secure them a better life.

Seven years have passed. Rosa, now 33, is still in the United States and by herself. She works long hours cleaning bathrooms and makes barely enough to provide the basics for her children and herself. She has not been able to afford English classes and, as an illegal immigrant, does not qualify for loans or...

About the Author
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Abstract
Current thinking in mental health has begun to incorporate the centrality of culture in organizing people’s lives, relational patterns, and meaning systems. However, not much is understood regarding the impact of living in two or more cultures due to immigration. This paper addresses the losses, trauma, and adjustment difficulties suffered by people who leave behind significant frames of reference and relational contexts that sustain their identifications. Attempts are made to provide a relational frame for understanding people’s dilemmas within the therapeutic context. It is hoped this will help to expand providers’ frame of reference when servicing immigrants and their families.
scholarships to pursue further training. Without proper documents or English language skills, she is locked out of better paying and more fulfilling jobs. Her poor wages have not allowed her to save to return home with a nest egg. Meanwhile, the years pass, and her children's development is unfolding without her. As they grow, so do their needs and expenses. She worries about the impact of this long separation on her children's future relationship with her. She is concerned about being away at critical developmental transitions for her children. However, she worries most about her daughter, who is about to turn 14.

Rosa's uncertainty about the future takes a toll on her emotional well-being. The older she becomes and the rustier her skills as an executive secretary become, the more impossible it seems for her to be able to compete again for similar jobs back home. Rosa lives for the day she can return home to her children, family, friends, and country. But she believes she cannot return empty-handed.

Rosa's adjustment to her different life in the United States has taxed her coping skills and resiliency. Before emigrating, she did not pack the necessary safeguards against many of the disappointments, harshness, and unexpected realities she would find in the host country. She said with a sense of shame and deep sadness that she never thought she would end up cleaning bathrooms to support herself and her family. Rosa also reports a sense of shame about her ethnic background. She describes feeling inferior when in the company of "Americans" because of the negative way Mexicans are viewed in the United States. She is particularly attuned to racist nuances in her current social context. The disparity between who she thought she was and how she is viewed here has been a painful and difficult experience for her to integrate.

When I first saw Rosa, she described many of the symptoms that, according to the DSM-IV, would have classified her as having a major depression. She came self-referred to a local hospital’s mental health program which serves people of Latin and Central American ancestry. Initially, she wanted to know why she felt depressed since she could not understand what was “wrong” with her. Although Rosa presented in an eloquent manner all the facts related to the many losses she had experienced prior to and after her immigration, she had not made the connection between her depressive symptoms and her losses at the personal, parental, familial, class, cultural, and vocational levels. Furthermore, she had not viewed her deep grief and sadness as normative or as having meaning attached to her accumulated losses. As is the case with many immigrants, many losses usually predate and force their departure from their country of origin.

How do people cope and adjust when significant bonds and frames of reference are suddenly disrupted by forced migrations and displacement? Are there normative grieving reactions when emotional and cultural disconnections are experienced through dislocation, or do people become symptomatic when unable to connect their feelings of sadness and despair to the losses experienced? How is the migrant’s belief system or construction of his/her reality influenced by culture, ethnicity, developmental stage, gender, and class? Are there mediating variables that can potentially ameliorate the cumulative effect of losses related to migrating? Do helping professionals in the host culture pathologize the manifestation of loss when unable to resonate to migrants grief or to their metaphorical ways of communicating distress?

The following vignette illustrates some of these questions and raises others that hopefully will be addressed in more depth throughout this paper.

Vignette 2: Alejandra

Alejandra, a Guatemalan 38-year-old mother of five, came illegally to the United States, leaving her children behind. She followed her husband who, after six months of unsuccessful attempts at finding a job, became severely depressed and began drinking. He was forced to leave a good political job in their country after being sentenced to death by the extremist right wing. In Guatemala, Alejandra had worked selling jewelry and had a supportive network of clients.

Alejandra risked her life by undertaking a dangerous underground month-long journey in order to get to the United States. She reported that many women were raped and robbed, and a man traveling with them was killed when attempting to protect one of the women. Alejandra ran out of money shortly after beginning this journey, given the many bribes she was forced to pay to soldiers along the way. Alejandra said she went without food for days at a time. She became infested with parasites and covered with animal bites. She slept in hideouts during the day and walked all night crossing rivers and swamps.