Acculturative Stress, Anxiety, and Depression among Mexican Immigrant Farmworkers in the Midwest United States

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No previous studies have examined the psychological functioning of immigrant farmworkers in the midwest United States. The purposes of the present study were threefold: (1) to assess the prevalence levels of anxiety and depression in a sample of Mexican immigrant farmworkers in the midwest United States; (2) to explore the relationships among acculturative stress, anxiety, and depression; and (3) to examine the variables that best predict anxiety and depression. The overall sample revealed elevated levels of anxiety and depression. Immigrant farmworkers with heightened levels of acculturative stress reported high levels of anxiety and depression. Family dysfunction, ineffective social support, low self-esteem, lack of choice in the decision to immigrate and live a migrant farmworker lifestyle, high education levels, and low levels of religiosity were significantly associated with high levels of anxiety and depression. The overall findings suggest that Mexican immigrant farmworkers who experience elevated levels of acculturative stress may be “at risk” for experiencing high levels of anxiety and depression. The findings highlight the importance of establishing prevention and treatment services for migrant farmworkers that aim to increase levels of emotional support, self-esteem, and coping skills.

KEY WORDS: migrant farmworker; acculturative stress; anxiety; depression; Mexican immigrants; Hispanic.

BACKGROUND

Immigrants may encounter many stressors during the process of acculturating to a new country (1–2). For example, immigrants may experience the breaking of ties to family and friends in their country of origin, thus resulting in feelings of loss and a reduction in coping resources. Immigrants may also experience factors that are specific to the new environment. These include discrimination, language inadequacy, the lack of social and financial resources, stress and frustration associated with unemployment and/or low income, feelings of not belonging in the host society, and a sense of anxious disorientation in response to the unfamiliar environment. Immigrants may furthermore feel pulled between the influence of traditional norms, values, and customs and the values, norms, and experiences in the new culture (e.g., parent–child conflict due to the child’s encountering of the new culture through school; role conflict due to a working mother).

Acculturative Stress Framework

The above types of experiences are encapsulated by the term acculturative stress, which refers to the stress that directly results from and has its source in the acculturative process (2). Hovey (3–4) and Hovey and King (5–6) presented a conceptual framework for studying acculturative stress among immigrants...
and its relationship to psychological functioning. These authors extended Berry’s (2, 7–8) acculturative stress model to include possible consequences of elevated levels of acculturative stress, rather than focusing on predictors of acculturative stress as have other researchers (9–11). The revised framework has two components. First, it suggests that acculturating individuals experience varying levels of acculturative stress, and that high levels of acculturative stress may result in significant levels of anxiety and depression. In other words, the model suggests that individuals who experience high levels of acculturative stress may be at risk for the development of anxiety and depression. Second, the model identifies the cultural and psychological factors that may account for high versus low levels of anxiety and depression. These include social support found within the new community; support from immediate and extended family support networks; socioeconomic status (SES); pre-migration variables, such as adaptive functioning (self-esteem, coping ability), knowledge of the new language and culture, and control and choice in the decision to immigrate (voluntary vs. involuntary); cognitive attributes, such as expectations for the future (hopeful vs. nonhopeful); religiosity; and the nature of the larger society—that is, the degree of tolerance for and acceptance of cultural diversity within the new environment. These variables may serve as predictors of anxiety and depression. Acculturating individuals with positive expectations for the future and relatively high levels of social support may, for example, experience less depression than individuals without the same expectations and support.

Hovey used the above framework to guide past research that explored the psychological functioning of immigrants. For example, Hovey and King (5) explored the relationship among acculturative stress, depressive symptoms, and suicidal ideation in a sample of adolescent Mexican immigrants. They found that acculturative stress was positively associated with depression and suicidal ideation, and that acculturative stress, perceived family dysfunction, and nonhopeful “expectations for the future” were significant predictors of depression and suicidal ideation. Hovey (3–4) found the same positive relationship among acculturative stress, depression, and suicidal ideation in samples of adult Mexican and Central American immigrants. These latter two studies also found that family dysfunction, ineffective social support, low levels of religiosity, nonhopeful expectations for the future, lack of choice in the decision to immigrate, and low levels of education and income significantly predicted high levels of depression and suicidal ideation. Hovey’s overall findings suggest that those acculturating individuals experiencing elevated levels of acculturative stress are “at risk” for experiencing critical levels of psychological distress, and that buffering variables such as those above may help protect against distress during the acculturative process.

Characteristics of Migrant Farmworkers

There are approximately 1 million migrant farmworkers in the United States (12–13). Migrant farmworkers are individuals who annually migrate from one place to another to earn a living in agriculture. This is in contrast to seasonal farmworkers, who live in one location during the year. Migrant farmworkers generally live in the southern half of the United States during the winter and migrate north before the planting or harvesting seasons. Three migrant streams have been identified (12, 14). The West Coast stream is primarily composed of Mexican immigrants who return to Mexico or the southwest United States after the harvest season. The East Coast stream is primarily composed of Puerto Ricans and African-Americans who migrate from Florida. The Midwest stream is primarily composed of Mexican migrants who return to Mexico or Texas after the agricultural season.

Several authors (12–16) have noted the difficulties intrinsic to a migrant farmworker lifestyle. For example, migrant farmworkers are socially marginal. This situation is intensified by the physical isolation, discrimination, and limited opportunities experienced by migrants. Most migrant farmworkers earn less than $6,000 per year, making them one of the most economically deprived groups in the United States. Farm labor is strenuous. Migrant workers are often subjected to dangerous working conditions, such as being sprayed with pesticides, and thus, not surprisingly, farm labor has the highest incidence of workplace fatalities in the United States. Child labor is common, and thus the average migrant worker has a sixth-grade education. Migrant workers typically find housing in labor camps provided by their employers. However, the housing and sanitation are often substandard. For example, one-room homes that lack water and toilet facilities are common, and drinking water and toilet facilities are often not readily available in the fields. Finally, although their health