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Nidia A. Ponce Orozco  
El Ser a través de las Fronteras y el Tiempo:  
The Experience of Mexican Immigrant  
Women and their Sense of Self

## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigates immigration as a defining event in the experiences of Mexican undocumented immigrant women. Specifically, the line of inquiry is guided by one main research question: How do individuals subjectively perceive their immigration experiences as shaping their sense of self? The study reviews a wide range of psychosocial literature on identity definitions, historical views of identity, models of identity development, immigration, biculturalism and the effect of international relocation on identity. Furthermore, the circumstances and reasons for leaving one's country of origin are diverse and complex for every immigrant. This study provides some understanding of a few general commonalities and differences in the experiences of Mexican immigrant women, as represented by 12 participants.

Through the original words of Mexican women, this study presents the immigration stages that immigrant women go through in finding ways to bring continuity and coherence to their lives in a new land. The study reveals how these women are confronted with multiple opportunities, such as new outlets for growth and make a fresh start; losses and stressors, such as like racism, poverty, and other forms of oppression. A defining circumstance of immigration for the study participants is legal status, which added enormous stress and threaten their sense of self. Their stories portray numerous personal and cultural qualities, like courage, love, determination, creativity, and resiliency. These assets prove to facilitate growth and strengthen their ability to create a psychological bridge between their past and present lives across divergent worlds.

EL SER A TRAVÉS DE LAS FRONTERAS Y EL TIEMPO:  
THE EXPERIENCE OF MEXICAN IMMIGRANT WOMEN  
AND THEIR SENSE OF SELF

A project base upon an independent investigation,  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2007

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“Se los agradezco de corazón”

## DEDICATION - DEDICATORIA

*This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Lucila y Armando.*

Papá le doy gracias por todo el amor y cariño que siempre tiene para todos, especialmente por escucharme y hacerme sentir que mis pensamientos son importantes/valiosos. Gracias por volver a casa después de tantos viajes a este país, arriesgando su vida por darnos lo mejor. Su historia de las muchas aventuras de ser inmigrante cruzando la frontera me ha enseñado a valorar en la vida, dar lo mejor de mí, vencer mis miedos, y tener la confianza de que voy a estar bien donde quiera que Dios me lleve. Por usted he aprendido que no tengo que ser perfecta y que es importante pedir perdón. Estoy orgullosa de usted, de sus logros, el buen ejemplo, y el amor/respeto que tiene para mi mamá y Dios.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	ii
DEDICATION.....	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iv
CHAPTER	
I.    INTRODUCTION.....	1
II.   LITERATURE REVIEW.....	5
III.  METHODOLOGY.....	39
IV.   FINDINGS.....	48
V.   DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS.....	98
REFERENCES.....	115
APPENDIXES	
Appendix A: Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB) Approval.....	119
Appendix B: Informed Consent Form – English.....	120
Appendix B2: Informed Consent Form – Spanish.....	123
Appendix C: Resource List.....	126
Appendix D: Demographic Questions – English.....	127
Appendix D2: Demographic Questions – Spanish.....	128
Appendix E: Semi-Structured Interview Questions – English.....	129
Appendix E2: Semi-Structured Interview Questions – Spanish.....	130
Appendix F: Recruitment Poster – English.....	131
Appendix F2: Recruitment Poster – Spanish.....	132

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

This study explores the experiences of Mexican immigrant women and the changes of sense of identity they experience through the relocation process. In the process of moving between two countries, in the shift between two divergent cultures and societies, the adult must, somehow, create a psychological bridge between her past and present life. As the transition takes place, it has both positive and negative elements. An enormous loss occurs in this move—one loses all that was familiar: friends, language, understood social customs, culture (the arts and the music and the literature), a familiar social hierarchy, and often even close family members. However, alongside the various losses is a renewed opportunity for growth and alteration. In the proposed study, I will explore the effects of relocation on their present sense of self and women's process of self-identity reconciliation.

Specifically, the line of inquiry will be guided by one main research question: Do individuals subjectively perceive their immigration experiences as shaping their sense of self? I hope to find some of the variables such women need to sustain their self-identity in the face of complicated and challenging immigration journeys.

Mexican immigrant women may experience relocation as a unique composite of losses and gains. The majority of studies concerning immigration focus on these external losses or manifestations of successful assimilation/acclimation: on language acquisition, job success, integration into the community, and so on.

Few have attempted to decipher the internal processes related to the reconciliation of sense of self, which enables the immigrant to grieve the external losses and accomplish these formidable tasks. For instance, there are studies around women's expressions of "nostalgia" for their birth places and the relationship with immigrants' subjective quality of life, but there appears to be limited study of "nostalgia" for their former self. Kaminsky (1993) in his response to Antokeletz's paper on cross-cultural transformation states that "the inner experience of people living in the bewildering space between-and-between languages and cultures" is a difficult and neglected socially urgent area of research and practice (p. 104).

The study of immigrant Mexican women and their self-identity experiences after immigration to the U.S. will advance social workers further understand of the ongoing intrapsychic, interpersonal, and social processes of these women's adaptation to a new home. This, in turn, facilitates differentiating interventions in order to be of greatest aid to the individual experiencing a "normal" transitional (identity) crisis or a pathological response to this change.

Results of existing studies generally carry important implications for clinical practice with Latinos and results also have laid groundwork for further studies about mental health issues faced by immigrants from Mexico. This study will purposively be composed of Mexican undocumented immigrant women living in the greater Denver, Colorado area. Participants will be recruited through the snowball method and recruitment advertisement at several naturally occurring community organizations.



In this study, the term Latino immigrant is defined as any individual from the area known as Latin America, which incorporates Mexico, Central America, South America and the Caribbean. There is a lack of information specifically on Mexican undocumented immigrant women. When immigrants arrived to the United States their self-identity is meshed within the larger group –Latinos, which include people from across Latin American, and U.S. born first generation immigrants, whose experience and background greatly differ from that of a new arrived Mexican. Consequently, this study will be limited in providing accurate/specific information pertaining only to Mexican immigrants.

“Immigrant” refers to a person who has moved from one region of the world to another region, in this case individuals from Mexico moving to the United States with the purpose for resettlement. The term “Mexican” implies some similarities, in that the women are all immigrants from regions in Mexico with related histories. Spanish is their dominant language. But the term should also imply a diversity that is shaped by different states within the same country, immigration journeys and life stories. That all Latinos in the United States are united by the dominant culture is a major contributor to their loss of self-identity. By necessity they must overcome it by redefining their relationship to their past and present experiences. This study will focus on this redefinition, and the subtle, but powerful psychological aspects of their relocation.

The term “undocumented immigrants” will be used in this study, but throughout other existing literature and at different times they are also referred to as unauthorized migrants, illegal immigrants, illegal aliens, and undocumented aliens.

The literature explains that undocumented immigrants are those who do not fall into any of the legal categories. Two groups account for most undocumented immigrants: “those who entered the country without valid documents, including people crossing the Southwestern border clandestinely; and those who entered with valid visas but overstayed their visas’ expiration” (Passel, Capps, & Fix, 2004, p. 4).

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This review will examine the literature on sense of self and identity, as well as some pertinent information about immigration and biculturalism that give emphasis to this study's research question: How do individuals subjectively perceive their immigration experiences as shaping their sense of self?

The process of immigration from one country to another brings about complex and multifaceted psychosocial effects that are significant and lasting on an individual's identity. Latinas/Latinos have become the largest ethnic minority group in the United States, representing 35.3 million people since the 1990 census was taken. Approximately 5.5 million Latin-American immigrants arrived to the United States over the past decade (Guzman, 2001). There is extensive research on ethnic identity development and acculturation associated with Latinos' mental health (Rogler, Cortes & Malgady, 1991). For instance, there are scales to measure the level of quality of life or assimilation that immigrants undergo as a consequence of long-term contact with another culture, yet it is difficult to locate information regarding transformation of self-identity associated with the experience of the process of immigration (Utsey, Chae, Brown, & Kelly, 2002; Zea, Asner-Self, Birman, & Buki, 2003).

Many authors and researchers recommend further study on the subject of individuals' reconnecting with lost or longed-for aspects of earlier identities in order to facilitate identity continuity during difficult and vulnerable processes, such as

immigration and long-term adjustment to a new culture (Ferlazzo, 2005; Pololsky Schneller, 1980; Wolff, 2002). It is this recommendation which is pertinent to the investigation. The review that follows is intended to reflect how this study adds to the body of literature about immigration, with a specific focus on how an immigrant's sense of self may be disrupted and transformed as a result of immigration process and relocation. To that end, pertinent literature on identity definitions, historical views of identity, models of identity development, immigration, biculturalism and the effect of international relocation on identity will be reviewed.

### Identity Formation

#### Definitions of Identity

In order to understand the magnitude and implications of the transformations of identity with regards to Mexican women's experiences of relocation, it is important to understand the basis of what we call "self" and "identity." The idea of self is prominent in current psychological theories describing childhood and adult development. The inquiry into the nature of the self as an organizing principle in human development has been a fundamental aspect of psychological, philosophical and spiritual investigations. The term "identity" refers to one's sense of self and one's feelings and ideas about oneself- definitions that also describe the term self-concept (Calhoun, 2002). Other definitions of identity focus on individual attributes, values, attitudes and abilities to differentiate one from others (Alue-Aygun & Karakitapo, 2004). Thus, identity establishes "who you are", and is noted to be essential to all healthy humans.

Erick Erikson (1974) states that “a sense of identity means a sense of being at one with oneself as one grows and develops” (p.27). Ward and Styles (2003) note that “ if individuals do not have a clear sense of self or identity they will not have a clear sense of their motives, goals, attitudes, values or set of social roles which are all part of their identity” (p.351). This investigation’s observation motivates the study of the experiences of Mexican immigrant women and the effects of sense of self they experience resulting from immigration to the United States.

Within the scope of this paper, the term “identity” and “sense of self” will be used to refer to ‘women’s sense of self’, and ‘women’s feelings and ideas about themselves’. The terms “identity” and “sense of self” will be used interchangeably in this study.

#### Historical Views of Identity

The term “identity” is widely used in psychology and sociology and is derived from the Latin root *idem* implying sameness and continuity. Despite its long history, it was not until the 20th century that the term identity came into popular usage. Discussions of identity take three major forms—psychodynamic, socio behavioral and sociological and within these areas multiple theories have been developed to define this term. Guthrie (1979) wrote that for socio behaviorists in general, “self” refers to “an observable, measurable, codable, and most important conscious sense of who the person is, which may be defined in terms of roles, statuses, or other categories of behavior or of interpersonal interaction” (p. 165). On psychodynamic terms, much of the current thinking around identity emerged from Freud’s work.

Freud discussed the theory of identification, explaining that the person introjects an external object.

Psychodynamic theory defines identity as “the inner core of a psychic structure as having a continuous (though often conflicting) identity” (Scott and Marshall, 2005, par. 1-5). On the other hand, Erik Erickson (1974) did extensive studies on identity and identity formation and he saw identity as a process located in the core of the individual yet also in the core of his or her collective culture. He makes a connection between community and individual to define identity. For the purposes of this study, Gehrie’s (1974) concept of identity forms the basic definition, which stresses “a fundamentally internal experience of the self, which cannot be assessed only by external observation” (p.165-166).

### Models/Theories of Identity Development

#### Women Identity Development

Recently, several authors have proposed that there are important gender differences in the experience and construction of the self (Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1991, 1976; Spencer, 2000). Miller (1991) discusses the necessity of developing new language and new concepts to describe women’s unique experiences and points to the problems which arise when the principles of male development are cast as universal principles of human development. This is even more problematic when applying those concepts to culturally diverse populations.

Psychodynamic theory, particularly Erickson’s theory of human development, suggests that “development of the self is attained via a series of painful crises by which the individual accomplishes a sequence of allegedly essential separations from others and thereby achieves an inner sense of separated individuation” (Miller, 1991, p. 1). First, separation from mother at early stages of childhood, then from the family in adolescence,

and later from teachers and mentors in order to form a distinct, separate identity (Mahler, 1975; Erikson, 1963).

Contrary to this belief, in her self-in-relation theory or relational-cultural theory, Jean Miller (1991) argues that “all growth occurs within emotional connections, not separate from them...and the possibility of having any sense of self at all is built on the process of caretaking or attending to each other’s mental and emotional states” (p. 3; Alvarez, 1999). In support of this theory Mead (1934) states that identity emerges through interactions with others in the person’s social context, others who reaffirm who one is and what one does. Miller (1991) writes that in the interplay between “being-in-relationship” and adopting the culturally induced belief about gender roles is the process through which the person develops a sense of one’s self, that is, an internal or mental representation of one’s identity (p.3). This theory is reinforced by other theorists, like Josselson (1987, as cited on Mercer) who also emphasized the importance of relationships for women’s development by stating, “communion, connection, relational embeddedness, spirituality, and affiliation—with these, women construct an identity” (p. 111).

Early theories, particularly psychoanalytic theory correlate physical and emotional separation/individuation with growth and development of sense of self. Other literature suggests that Latinas, including Mexican women, are reported to be failing to develop an “healthy or/and normal” internal sense of self when they do not follow the western norms of “healthy adult development,” such as separating from parents at a specific age and becoming independent of family, which are representative of ideas about family life. Indeed, what constitutes “excessive” connectedness in one culture may have

entirely different meanings in other, as it is the case of interdependence of the Latino family (Falicov, 1998).

As Miller and others note, the sense of self develops ‘in relationship’. Since developing close relationships is an important defining aspect of sense of self for Mexican women, there is a real impact on sense of self during the process of immigration. This impact will affect the developed sense of self during the changes of immigration that will have to be reconciled. Relational-cultural theory therefore provides a useful frame of reference in which to address the experiences of Mexican immigrant women and their experiences with sense of self after immigration.

### Elements of the Self

The self-in-relation theory emphasized that the self is organized and developed through practice in relationships where the goal is the increasing development of mutually empathic relationships. Surrey, researcher associate at the Stone Center (1983) states that “it is the ability to experience, comprehend and respond to the inner state of another person...which relies on a high level of psychological development and learning and its origin is in the early mother-daughter relationship” (p.3). This dynamic is best illustrated through the mother daughter relationship. An important element that develops within the mother-daughter relationship is emotional and cognitive connectness, which is believed, facilitates the growth of a sense of self through mutual sharing of experience and psychological connection. Finally, mutual empowerment, which involves the ability to take care of the relationship between a mother and daughter relationship model.



Surrey (1983) summarizes the basic elements of the core self in women as: 1) an interest in, and attention to, the other person (s) which form the base for the emotional connection and the ability to empathize with the other (s); 2) the expectation of a mutual empathic process where the sharing of experience leads to a heightened development of self and other; and 3) the expectation of interaction and relationship as a process of mutual sensitivity and mutual responsibility which provides the stimulus for the growth of empowerment and self-knowledge (p. 7). This model will provide a useful frame to further analyze the experiences of Mexican immigrant women and their sense of self after their immigration.

#### Mexicans vs. North Americans Identity Development

Comparing Latin-Americans and North Americans identity development is important since it is in this transition and interaction between cultures that the identity of women is challenged. Gehrie (1979) states that the significance of “culture is internal, and forms part of an individual’s own self-representation” (p. 170). Research findings indicate that Latin-Americans tend to define themselves in relation to community, emphasizing social relationships and connectedness (LaRoche, 2002; Perez-Foster, 1998; Ferdman, 2001). On the other hand, people in the United States value individualism and autonomy, positive values which are portrayed in different ways, like the communication style and independence from family ties, which are seen as growth-promoting (Marlin, 1994, p. 8-9; Charmaz, 1983). Perez-Foster (1999) notes that one of North American’s standard to define people’s identity are their style of communication. For example, in America, being assertive, speaking up and talking about one’s feelings is reinforced by family and society since childhood (p.274). On the other hand, collective cultures, such

as Mexican culture rely more on non-verbal and indirect styles of communication and familismo, which is defined as the “solid identification and attachment of individuals to their families and the strong feelings of loyalty, reciprocity, and solidarity among family members” (Sabogal et al., p. 398). These contrasting values of “ideal” identity among Latin-America and United States cultures suggest the importance of studying the experiences of Mexican immigrant women and the effects on self identity they experience as they immigrate from the one type of culture to the very different other culture.

Furthermore, authors note that therapists should be informed about immigrant patient’s cultural values, in order to avoid seeing problems and traits of the patient as more pathological than they indeed are. LaRoche (2002) suggests that “traditional Western values have often been used as the yardstick by which to measure Latinos (immigrants), which can distort and underestimate their strengths” (p. 117). Mexican women encounter multiple cultural differences when they immigrate to the United States and these cultural differences need to be considered by professionals when using western treatment models to serve this population. Generally, immigrants are asked by the new society to assimilate to the American culture in ways that devalue and threaten their identity and the basis of their identity development, like community and language. Contributing to this pressure, past and present immigration policies have asked immigrants to assimilate the language and values of United States. For example, amid all contention between the House legislation and the Senate regarding stricter security along American borders they came to “a consensus on one fundamental goal, namely, that every immigrant to the U.S. should learn English” (Freedberg, 2006). This socio-

political norm has positive implications but also carries a lot of burden for Mexican immigrant women. Mirsky (1991, as cited in Lijtmaer, 2001) states that “learning a new language involves an internalization of new object and self-representations and reactivates the internal process of separation” (2001, p. 433). The loss or inability to use the mother tongue in immigration is accompanied by a deep sense of loss of self-identity. This is a major factor that Mexican immigrant women face when coming to the United States. Another fundamental tradition that is given up in some cases through the immigration process is the gender role, influenced by economic circumstances or opportunity for growth, the traditional role of staying home and raising one’s children is in some cases lost (Falicov, 1998; Lijtmaer, 2001). Other theorists argue that some of the fundamental traditions of immigrants are given up because there is not ample opportunity for a “bicultural self-identity,” as described by Kaminsky (2003), who suggests “creating a continuity of experience or good enough cohesiveness among aspects of the self that bear the echoes of mutually alien cultural systems” (p.106).

If Mexicans see themselves and think and feel about themselves in collective terms rather than individualistic terms, it is important for mental health professionals to think about the impact of immigration on these women’s self-identity, and take into account the magnitude of the loss incurred due to immigration. During the process of immigration, these women compromised much of what they valued, understood, and shared for many years with friends and fellow citizens who possessed and were influenced by the same socio-historical experience.

In this study, it will be important to analyze the way in which Mexican immigrant women describe themselves and their journeys.

It will be equally important to explore the impact of immigration in the way they define themselves, living in the United States, contrary of when they lived in Mexico.

#### Loss, Grief, and Melancholia & Effects on Identity

Immigration is a major life changing event, and although immigrants have different experiences of adaptation to the new country, immigration is frequently associated with severe distress and other mental health issues (Flaskerud & Uman, 1996; Ward & Styles, 2003). For some individuals, relocation and adaptation to the new culture may present as an easy transition; yet, for others the impact of leaving their homeland and the subsequent process of immigration could “prove to be daunting” to their identity (Ward and Styles, 2003; Marlin, 1994, p.9).

In recognizing that identity development is a lifespan issue, Erikson (1980) viewed identity formation as an ongoing development process throughout the life span in response to the social environment in which a person lives. This development consists of a series of crises or challenges, which could be an opportunity of potential growth. If the crisis is negotiated successfully the person will gain strength (Erickson, 1980). The emotional takes the form of a grieving process as the person recognizes their loss and works through the formation of new aspects of their identity (Ward and Styles, 2003). The new identity formation that may follow the grieving process has been explored to explain the change in the person following exposure to crisis situations such as trauma, adolescence, adoption, aging, loss of a love one, loss of employment, terminal illness. (Espin, 1992; Ward and Styles, 2003; Charmaz, 1983; Milligan, 1999).

Certainly, immigration represents a challenge in terms of a radical change in one’s social environment, thus testing Erikson’s theory.

The research around this type of crises situations illustrates the effects of loss of sense of self because of the multiple losses that occur during immigration.

For example, just as in the case of chronic illness, immigration can result in spiraling consequences such as loss of productive function, financial crises, family strain or no support system, stigma (because of discrimination), and a restricted, isolated and stigmatized existence.

During the process of immigration the identity of an individual is challenged by diverse factors. Salman Akhtar (1995), states that immigration results in a sudden change from an “average expectable environment” to a strange and unpredictable one, this is called “culture shock,” which is considered a threat to the stability of the immigrant’s psychic organization (Garza-Guerrero, 1974; Espin, 1992, p.13). A second threat is the mourning over the losses inherent in immigration, which in coexistence with “culture shock” causes major disruption to the person’s identity (p. 1052). Psychoanalyst Garza Guerrero in his article “Culture Shock: Its Meaning and the Vicissitudes of Identity” (1974) gives a working concept of it as follows:

Cultural shock can be described as a reactive process stemming from the impact of a new culture upon those who attempt to merge with it as a new comer. Culture shock profoundly testes the overall personality functioning, is accompanied by mourning for the abandoned culture and relationships, and severely threatens the newcomer’s identity (p. 410).

Akhtar says, metaphorically, that the process of immigration is similar to the separation-individuation phase in a baby, which she says contains elements of mourning (p. 1064). Frequently, the home country is idealized as “the fantasy of a lost paradise” way beyond reality, whereby primary objects (home country) are neither given up

through the work of grieving nor assimilated into the ego through identification with new home. Consequently, it results in what has been termed “fracture of the psyche”.

Kohut (1971, as cited on Gehrie) notes that fracture of the self is experience as “a sense of separation of their self experience from their various physical and mental functions” (p. 165).

Espin (1987) wrote that loss, grief and mourning are issues of primary importance when working with immigrants. This statement is reinforced by Freud. In Mourning and Melancholia, Freud tried to explain the correlation of mourning and melancholia by writing, “Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, and ideal, and so on” (Freud, 1925, p. 239-259). Freud suggests that like mourning, melancholia may be a reaction to the loss of a love object, for example an individual may experience melancholia and mourning due to loss of one’s country or relocating. In yet other cases, according to Freud, the individual can understand that a loss of this kind has occurred, but can not see clearly what it is that has been lost, referring to an object-loss. In the case of Mexican immigrant women, it is reasonable to say that they might understand and mourn for the many losses incurred in their immigration, but can not consciously perceive the internal loss- the loss of sense of self. Freud explained, “...the patient cannot consciously perceive what he has lost...This, indeed, might be so even if the patient is aware of the loss which has given rise to his melancholia, but only in the sense that he knows *whom* [italics in original] he has lost but not *what* [italics in original] he has lost in him” (Freud, 1925, p.245). This is an important contribution to our

understanding of the effects of external losses that can be attributed to the process of immigration and the impact on the identity or sense of self in the individual.

Attempts to understand the psychological distress experienced by immigrants have generally focused on factors in the new environment or the acculturation stress. While the loss of home country and loved ones plays a significant role in the immigrant's adjustment, it is difficult to adjust when there is a loss of self-identity due to immigration.

Grinberg and Grinberg (as cited in Akhtar, 1995) state:

Clearly, the immigrant must give up part of his individuality, at least temporarily, in order to become integrated in the new environment. The greater the difference between the new community and the one to which he once belonged, the more he will have to give up (p.90).

Freud's writing can further expand the existing clinical knowledge regarding the psychological state and grieving process of Mexican immigrant women with relation to immigration and their experiences of sense of self. In his writing Freud gives a clinical picture that helps differentiate when immigrant women might be experiencing either mourning or melancholia. He suggests that mourning represents grieving of external losses, and melancholia represent the unconscious state of loss in sense of self. Freud said:

In mourning we found that the inhibition and loss of interest are fully accounted for by the work of mourning in which the ego is absorbed. In melancholia, the unknown loss will result in a similar internal work and will therefore be responsible for the melancholic inhibition. The difference is that the inhibition of the melancholic seems puzzling to us because we cannot see what it is that is absorbing him so entirely. The melancholic displays something else besides which is lacking in mourning—an extraordinary diminution in his self-regard, an impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale. In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself (1917, p. 245-246).

This could be an extreme way to relate Freud's quote to the psychological experience of Mexican women and their experiences of immigration on their sense of self; yet, this quote provides a basis to capture the degree of distress or experience that women might experience.

While many immigrants resolve the grief and reintegrate themselves, others present delayed or unresolved grief after years of residing in the United States (Espin, 1987, p.499-500). Parkes (as cited in Espin, 1987) suggests among anxiety and other physiological symptoms, "an urge to search and find the lost object, anger and guilt, feelings of internal loss of self, identification with the lost object, and pathological variants of grief" are several features by which to identify unresolved grief (p.499; Lijtmaer, 2001, p. 427).

Even with the distressing emotions that mourning, grief, and nostalgia can bring, immigrants appear to need these elements to facilitate the process of redefining the immigrant's functional sense of identity. Nostalgia in particular is identified as an important linking phenomenon to immigrants' birthplaces and sense of self. Nostalgia was defined in the 16 century by the physician Maimonides from the Greek *nosos* (knowledge) and *algia* (pain), "to denote a malady or syndrome that he observed in immigrants" (Ferlazzo, 2005; Falicov, 1998, p. 55).

Milligan (2003), who explores the role of nostalgia in establishing new identity categories, states that "nostalgia provides one way of maintaining or regaining identity continuity" (p.381; Akhtar, 1999). Indeed, in situations where nostalgia and mourning cannot even evolve, Volkan (1999) contends immigrants cannot adapt and cannot achieve internal distinction and continuity of past, present and future.



He says that as a consequence, immigrants may develop symptoms or character traits to cover up such a lack of internal distinction and of immigration.

### The Effect of International Relocation on Identity

There is limited empirical research on the experiences of immigrants and the effects of self-identity that they experience due to immigration, specifically referring to Mexican immigrant women. Ward and Styles (2003) argue that immigration can impact a person's identity, and this impact may generate reworking or establishing aspects of the self. Their work focuses on loss of identity among women from the United Kingdom and Ireland currently living in Australia. In their study, the authors measured immigrant sense of belonging to the new country in terms of their sense of self. They found that immigration process had either a positive or negative impact on the identity of the person. On the positive side, study subjects referred to this change in terms of "growth in the self" and the changes included being more confident, stronger, and independent. Furthermore, Ward and Style's study concludes that reintegration of the self occurred over varying lengths of time for different people with different strategies facilitating or delaying the process (2003, p. 354-365).

The findings in Ward and Style's study can not be generalized or applicable to Mexican immigrant women migrating to United States whose place of origin is significantly more different than for those immigrant women living in Australia. Nationality-cultural aspects, such as language, socioeconomic status, and ethnic characteristics, among many others, are far less different for women from United Kingdom, Eire (Ireland), and Australia than those women from Mexico and the United States.

## Identity Discontinuity

Identity discontinuity is a concept that several researchers have used to describe the disruption or loss of continuity of identity due to relocation or displacement (Milligan 2003, Volkan, 1999; Cuba & Hummon, 1993). Ferlazzo (as stated in Davis, 1979) argues that identity discontinuity results in the emotion of nostalgia, “that the sources of nostalgic sentiment are to be found in felt threats to continuity of identity.”

In her study about Coffee House employees, Melinda Milligan (2003) helps us understand the meaning of what she calls “identity discontinuity”. Milligan found that employees who lost their job at a restaurant after years of employment experienced what she termed “identity discontinuity”, which can be described as a shared nostalgic sentiment for the loss of the place. Milligan theorizes that the development and maintenance of identity is associated with built environments or physical surroundings because social interaction, which contributes to identity formation, occurs in specific locations or settings. She states “space does not determine interaction, but shapes, constrains, and influences it” (p. 382). Milligan contends that repeated interactions in specific sites results in place attachment, which subjectively results from interactions. Therefore, spatial continuity and attachment to a particular location is closely linked to identity, and, when there is displacement, the individual’s identity is disrupted or discontinued. She called this “identity discontinuity”. In the case of Mexican immigrant women, their birthplace is their place of attachment. Besides, because there was a continuous/habitual pattern of behaviors and interactions in this place, identity discontinuity occurs, according to Milligan’s theory, because of the loss of this space association through their migration/relocation to the United States.

Akhtar (1995) points out the importance of place on the sense of self by noting that immigrants can reproduce the old life with people in the new place, since people do not differ greatly from one to the other. However, he cautions that places can differ so profoundly that “it is no longer possible to have certain sorts of experiences of place at all” (p.1060). Furthermore, she notes that in this loss of place the individual feels detached from the world, both the old and the new. Further examination of this is warranted.

Ferlazzo (2005) reflects in her thesis study of participants’ experiences of identity discontinuity. Contrary to what Akhtar believes, Ferlazzo notes that more than the country itself, immigrant women miss being part of a group (sense of belonging) and having a continuous identity in the United States, just like it was in their birthplace before immigration. In her study, one of the immigrant women shared:

When I go to Guatemala, I just feel as if I belong to it, I have my reservations about it, but I feel perfect there. When you go back to Guatemala, and you feel like you enjoy being the person you have always been, you feel like ‘god, here I am.’ It’s a sense of identity. That you lose here. People here have to guess me out, who I am, how I think. In Guatemala, they know how I am. They know. They understand. Do you understand what I’m saying? I miss that part. My core people... people that I love and have been loved by. People don’t know me here yet...It’s just that, people don’t know the Teresa that I’ve become. (Ferlazzo, 2005, p. 55-56)

This personal reflection illustrates how this particular woman yearns for the experience of being a whole person in the culture of her relocating place (country). This does not point to pathology, but to a sense of another, life that does not fully translate here in the United States. Furthermore, Espin (1987) wrote “sometimes it may require returning to the homeland for the immigrant to realize what her loss had entailed” (p. 499).

This observation can be linked to this woman's initial phrase "When I go to Guatemala." Because of their undocumented status, Mexican immigrant women do not have much opportunity to go back to their native country. This may further affect their sense of self.

Olivia M. Espin (1992), who specializes on psychology of Latina women and who is a Cuban immigrant herself, uses the concept of "uprootedness" to share her "experiential analysis". She defines "uprootedness" as a deep sense "that you do not fully fit or feel comfortable in your new environment and that most of the time you do not even know that you don't" but also the place where the individual feels at home "is not fully home anymore...and who I am is inextricably intertwined with the experience of uprootedness" (p. 15-17).

### Stages of Immigration & Adaptation

Immigration is a dynamic, open-ended process which goes through several stages. Individuals writing about the psychological aspects of immigration have proposed various models of the migratory process. Since immigration is marked by multiple losses, some theorists have linked the stages of immigration adjustment to the process of mourning (Akhtar, 1995; Garza-Guerrero, 1973). Other models give more emphasis to decision making and behavior involved in the migration journey. For example, Espin (1987) has pointed out three stages (1) the initial decision concerning relocation, (2) the actual geographical move into another country, and (3) the adaptation to a new society and way of life (p. 491). Despite the differences, models of migratory adaptation generally include three phases: an early encounter phase of disorganization and instability

where the themes of loss and grief are significant; a middle phase of reorganization and adaptation, and a final phase in which a new stability is achieved.

According to Marlin (1994) many necessary external and internal changes must be worked through by the immigrant in order to successfully adapt before she regains a sense of familiarity. She further argues that the immigrant faces a lot of stress in this change process since all this work has to be done in a new environment, and at a time when survival depends on securing basic needs and acquiring new skills and attitudes (1994, p. 9)

Akhtar (1995) writes on psychodynamic terms, especially referring to the work of Mahler, about the experience of immigrants and the impact on sense of self. She does not identify particular time frames but she agrees that the immigration transition is a period of huge ambivalence. Akhtar seems to describe the experienced encounter during the initial phase of immigration. According to Akhtar; immigrants tend to respond to this experience by using the ego defenses of splitting, idealization, and devaluation. Self-representations, as well as objects (like home country and adopting country) are split, idealized or devalued and there is a reverse shift from time to time (Espin, 1992, p. 13-15). For example, one day the home country or self is “all good” and the new the adopting country is “all bad”, but the next day this could reverse. Even with this tendency on shifting, immigrants commonly seem to idealize and live on the past. Akhtar (1996, 1995) writes that immigrants are vulnerable to the experience associated with “someday” and possibly wanting to go back to their past life. They may also feel “if only I had stayed” and possibly regrets of the relocation. Both are feelings of nostalgia and

fantasies of the past and future that are alienated from the present and cause a temporal discontinuity in the experience (p. 1057).

These ego defenses are explained by Charmaz (1983) who asserts that in most situations of loss, individuals look for a means to preserve their former identities or to establish new ones in order to regain a sense of continuity. It is indeed this process of synthesis that a person has to go through in order to integrate images of self and objects (Akhtar, 1996, p.1057). Using the migratory adaptation model, synthesis could be the middle phase in the migratory process.

Akhtar (1995) says that as a result of this synthesis, “a capacity for good-humored ambivalence toward both the country of origin and that of adoption develops. Such an identity, though perhaps lacking historical-identification system, might yet possess a greater than usual breadth of experience, a sense of relativity, knowledge, and, at times, wisdom” (p. 1060). Settlege (as cited in Akhtar, 1995) states that “the predominance of love is the glue of a unified self-representation”. This certainly suggests potential clinical work and the value of normalizing their experiences and feelings. It further suggests that doing grief work with Mexican immigrant women might strengthen their ego capabilities and consequently their loss of sense of self experienced during the immigration process.

Coupled with the losses is a renewed opportunity for psychic growth and alteration. The new country offers strange-tasting food, new songs, different political concerns, unfamiliar language, pale festivals, unknown heroes, psychically unearned history, and a visually unfamiliar landscape. New channels of self-expression become

available. Akhtar notes that the new hosting country provide “new identification models, different superego dictates, and different ideals,” which provide the immigrant with opportunities to strength their self-identity or sense of self (Akhtar p. 1052).

Much can be learned from Espin’s (1992) personal narrative about the experienced of an “uprooted person” encompasses. She points out that she has grown in the immigration process learning new things that she might not have learned had she stayed in Cuba. Further, she expresses that she has developed valuable adaptive skills as a result of coping with so many changes. Adding to this insight, Rachel Josefowitz Siegel (1992) shares her own story as a Jewish immigrant in which she writes of immigration or “uprootness” as a coping mechanism itself. In speaking about her mother’s experience, Josefowitz Siegel, states, “when her life and that of her children had depended on getting away, she had learned to cope by uprooting herself and moving to a different place...that phrase seemed to carry the message of her life, which I had absorbed into my own sense of self.” (p. 110).

Espin (1992) argues that if she, a successful professional Latina, has struggle to survive and make sense of her experience or “uprootness” in a productive way, it is reasonable to assume that the pain and confusion experienced by other women less fortunate than herself will be more extreme and difficult to survive (1992, p. 15-18). Yet, Espin’s narrative also provides a sense of hope about the possibility for other immigrant women to recover from the impact of immigration on their sense of self.

Different theorists give diverse explanations about a stage in the immigration process in which the new immigrant experiences a loss of sense of self. They mention attachment to the birthplace and sense of belonging, among others, as factors that construct an individual's identity and therefore become missing aspects in a disrupted sense of self. Theorists also speak of the individuals' inner strength to strive to create continuity on their former sense of self, by using different coping skills or defenses. Just like the natural progress of conflict, after a chaotic and turbulent period of feeling at loss, it comes the time when the immigrant can perceive their immigration experience as an opportunity to strengthen and nurture their self. Indeed, the different stages of the immigration, the factors affecting the sense of self, and the personal coping skills are areas relevant to this study and interesting to explore in learning about the experiences of Mexican immigrant women and their experiences of sense of self after immigrating to the United States.

### Immigration

Human development and identity is in continuous transformation. Although it is accurate that all human beings experience life transitions, for people who have been subjected to historical dislocation or being pressured because of big changes to their socioeconomic circumstances "life crossroads can feel, intrapsychically, as more drastic and dramatic" (Espin, 1992, p. 17). Bandura's (1982, as stated in Espin) states that "a comprehensive developmental theory must specify factors that set and alter particular life courses if it is to provide an adequate explanation of human behavior". This is particularly important if we want to understand the experiences of immigration of



Mexican undocumented women, whose lives have been influenced by a diversity of circumstances, including historical and political events, regarding immigration laws and their residency status.

We live in an era of massive immigration and migration. Immigration happens as a result of wars, political changes, revolutions, or for economic reasons, among others (Marlin, 1994, p. 7). However, the recent outpouring of people from Mexico, while influenced by different specific reasons, appear to have in common the force of oppressive governments, economic collapse, and the people's desperation for basic survival. The United States has been looked at by immigrants "as a fantasy land, where, magically, they could get everything they lacked in their own country" (Marlin, 1994, p. 7). This "fantasy" or idealization is further reinforced by social and cultural expectations, related to the way that the media-portrays and idealizes America. In its own way, this reinforces what Akhtar says regarding immigrants tendency to "split" as a defense mechanism after their settlement. It also further illustrates Marlin's similar process before individuals immigrate, where "America" is all good and idealized and their native country is devalued.

In Akhtar's work (1995), he lists nine factors that determined the outcome of immigration and the effects on identity. These factors are worth analyzing in the context of the experience of Mexican immigrant women in order to understand their immigration experience and how it shapes their sense of self. Some of these factors are especially relevant to the experience of Mexican immigrant women and their experiences with a renewed sense of self following the immigration phase. Akhtar's (1995) first factor is

whether the immigration is temporary or permanent. To this regard Falicov (1998) notes that many Latino immigrants do not intend to stay permanently in the United States; rather, they plan to stay a limited amount of time, often in order to gain financial stability before returning home. The second mention by Akhtar is the degree of choice in leaving one's country, which includes the time available for preparing for the leave; The third consists of the possibility of revisiting the home country, according to Aktar this is important because those who have the means to go back suffer less than those who can not. The fourth factor in determining the effects of immigration on identity is age at which immigration occurs. Fifth, the reasons for leaving one's country also play a role in determining success or failure in adapting to the new environment. Sixth, the extent to which an individual has achieved the intrapsychic capacity for separateness prior to immigration. Seventh, the emotions with which the host culture receives the immigrant also play a role in the latter's assimilation and associated identity change. At different times in history immigrants might be seen and received differently, but certainly the lighter the color of the skin the better they might be treated. Eight, the magnitude of cultural differences between the adopted and the home country is an important variable. Finally, the extent to which one's original role (especially one's vocation) can be resumed upon immigration; maintaining one's professional identity assures an "inner continuity in change" (p. 1055-1056). Baltes (1980, as cited on Mercer 1989) supports the above by stating that "the impact of events such as relocation varies according to many factors such as timing, patterning, and duration of the event; the event becomes significant because of its impact on human development" (p. 134). The list of variables reflects the diversity of immigrant's experiences and the experience itself of immigration.

There are an estimate of 35.7 million estimate total foreign born population, 40 percent is represented by undocumented immigrants, approximately 9.3 to 10.3 million (Passel, 2004; Passel, Capps, Fix, 2004). The population of undocumented immigrants have steadily increased in size since 1990, and among several other states, Colorado is one of the states experiencing the greatest growth (Kahn, 2005; Passel, Capps, Fix, 2004). The majority of the undocumented population immigrates from Mexico (5.9 million) and Latin America (2.5 million). These statistics strengthens the need to research the “undocumented” immigrant population and makes pertinent to study of the experiences of Mexican immigrants and their experience of immigration as shaping their sense of self.

The Latino population in Colorado, particularly in the city of Denver has increased dramatically during the last 10 years. Between 1990 and 2000, its Latino population grew by 89 percent, triple the growth rate of the general population. By 2004, more than one in five metro Denver residents were Latinos (Arellano, 2006, p. 1-2). It is estimated that by 2050, Latinos in the United States will account for 25% of the population. Yet, Latinos are one of the groups with more psychosocial pressures, including language, cultural barriers, and low socioeconomic status. Undocumented immigrants lack full access to jobs, education, healthcare and many other resources. According to Rosado & Elias (as cited in Rosenthal) one third of Latinos live in poverty, which is over 250 percent above the national average (Rosenthal, 2002, p. 217). The percentage of undocumented immigrants living below the poverty level fairly mirrors that of legal immigrant residents, which is estimated to 200 percent below poverty level (Passel, Sucher, Fix, 2003).

There might be different reasons for the recent rapid increase of undocumented immigrants, but one compelling explanation is offered by Del Castillo. Del Castillo suggests that in the 1970's, Mexican males were temporarily recruited by the U.S. to assist in the labor-intensive harvesting and other jobs. They came for the harvesting time and then went back to their native country. In the 1990's there was a shift in this pattern, and immigrants started to come to the U.S. along with wives and children, which encouraged their settlement (2002, p. 18). This would suggest that Mexican women have come to this country for economic purposes, rather than because of fear of their lives, or due to physical oppression.

According to Kahn (2005), although immigrants are not a homogeneous group, undocumented immigrants arriving in recent years tend to have more education than those who've been in the country for a decade or more, as a group, undocumented immigrants have less education than other sections of the U.S. population. Compared with the 9 percent native born Americans and 25 percent of legal immigrants, 49 percent of undocumented immigrants have not completed high school. This is an important factor for this study since women have represented as much as 52 percent of the undocumented immigrant population in this country (Del Castilo, 2002, p.19). It is an important reason why this researcher has opted to include level of education as one of the selection criteria for participants. Another important characteristic is that the undocumented women are less likely to be in the labor force, mainly because the majority of these women are childbearing age, and they are more likely than U.S. citizens to have children remain in the home, and focus on the role of wife and mother (Kahn, 2005;

Passel, Capps, Fix, 2004). This contributes to the fact that Mexican families have below or minimal low wage jobs, of why undocumented immigrants to have incomes below the national poverty levels.

Society may wonder why immigrants decide to take the risk and disrupt the connections with their contexts of significance that is, their land, language, customs, families, friends, culture, sense of community, and ways of life, among others. Margarita Alvarez (1999), notes that “social inequalities and indifference, racism, ethnic conflicts, pollution, degradation of the ecology, drug trafficking, and political oppression are factors influencing the most vulnerable to flee to strange lands” (p. 6). Yet, she also argues that “the forces that shape and influence massive immigrations can no longer be seen in isolation, given the interconnectedness and interdependence of the global economy” (p. 8).

Alvarez (1999) states that “the act of crossing geographical borders implies danger and pain, but it is hope that propels people to do so” (p. 24). It is based on specific criteria that this study will offer the opportunity to learn about the motives and experiences of Mexican immigrant women and their experiences with sense of self due to immigration.

## Dealing with the New Experience of Racism & Oppression

### Becoming a “stereotype”

For some people, life pressures and events can be influenced by historical and political events far beyond their control. These events are important to understand when studying human development, transformation of identity, and a determinant of life paths.

The ways undocumented immigrants come to the United States are diverse. All too often, coming to the United States can be, traumatic and/or fatal for the Mexican woman immigrant. Whatever the method of immigration is, this journey marks the beginning of taking on a new status. Newly arriving Mexican immigrants find themselves labeled as “an undocumented immigrant” living in the United States. This labeling experience establishes a sense of negative stigmatization that is frequently unknown to the immigrant prior to their departure from their homeland. Being defined as a “minority” is often a completely new experience for immigrants. Alvarez (1999) notes that language can be utilized by people in position of power to define others to ascribe negative, or inferior, meanings to their experiences, feelings, history, and nature (p. 8). Miller (1986, as cited on Alvarez) states that “once a group is defined as inferior, they are given defective or substandard labels by those positioned in the superior group” (1999, p.8). A Palestinian woman in her description of what it was like for her and others to gradually become aware of their new status/label as refugees states, “we were upset. Being a refugee, you’re stigmatized; you’re poor; you’re nothing. Even though these (refugees) had come from very good homes. Nobody would trust you; nobody would

lend you money” (Roberson, 1992, p. 38). This Palestinian woman’s story reflects the difficulties of many undocumented Mexican immigrant women who have to prove themselves and others in the new land.

Just like refugees, these labels are often used to discriminate against undocumented Mexican immigrant women, who are discriminated and humiliated because of the different status/labels “immigrant and undocumented”.

They are further stigmatized because of the cultural and racial differences in the new country/society. Alvarez (1999) notes that “labels usually interfere with the development, freedom of expression, and action of those placed in inferior categories...in order for ‘inferiors’ to behave ‘normally,’ they must suppress or disconnect themselves from what they know and feel” (p. 8). Given so, it is clear that Mexican women’s sense of self and self-esteem will be negatively impacted during the immigration process because of the new status they obtain and the frequent oppressive circumstances they find themselves in.

As noted in her personal story, the Palestinian woman explained, “they started labeling us as refugees...And we became this label...But I thought, the fact that we are refugees and we are poor, that doesn’t mean that we are poor in mind, that we cannot make things, that we cannot do things” (Roberson, 1992, p.39). Immigrant woman will often encounter a disparity between who she thought she was and how she is viewed/treated in the new country, which can be a painful and difficult experience as she attempts to integrate into the new culture. It can also be a threat to her sense of self.

Furthermore, Alvarez (1999) states, even “the word ‘immigrant’ has negative connotations for many people, including opportunistic U.S. politicians... now illegal immigrants and their children, as well as those with legal status, are targeted and looked upon to shoulder the responsibility for the ills of American society” (p. 7-8).

Alvarez (1999) suggests that in an intent to accommodate to labels, categorizations, stereotypes, and expectations in the host culture, the immigrant experiences a sense of alienation and disconnection that can lead to conditions such as major depression because in order to accommodate to the conditions of the immigration transition, the individual often experiences a disconnect from her own essence (p. 13).

There is at least another form of discrimination in addition to legal status and ethnicity, and that is skin color. Akhtar (1995) noted the interdependence on the way an immigrant is received with identity change and she gives emphasis here to the importance of race and skin color, quoting Freud’s “anatomy is destiny” remark. This type of discrimination base on the basis of skin color may thus be quite familiar for many recently arrived Mexican immigrant women, since Latin American countries have a strong legacy of “racismo” that privileges lighter-skinned individuals (Falicov, 1998). In addition to experiencing racism within the larger dominant culture, Mexican immigrant women suffer discrimination within their own subculture, and this is perceived as a greater threat to their sense of self than the discrimination experienced at home because of being in a foreign country.

This information points out that racism and other forms of oppression, although experienced in their native country, they can complicate Mexican immigrant women



process of integration into a new culture and society; yet, the experience of being stigmatized as an outsider or other exacerbate the immigrant's experience with loss of sense of self.

### Acculturation & Biculturalism

There are longstanding studies about the process of acculturation and the mental health effects on immigrants (Gomez, 1990; Flaskerud, 1996). The traditional view of acculturation says that an ethnic individual's identification with his or her original culture slowly fades as he or she gradually becomes assimilated into the host culture. This is indeed a view that assumes that in order to be well adjusted, members of an ethnic group living within the dominant culture have to assimilate. In the other hand, biculturalism validates the fact that immigrants do assimilate the larger culture but simultaneously maintain their own roots. These are relevant concepts to the study of the experience Mexican immigrant women and their experience of sense of identity after their immigration, since acculturation and biculturalism speak of the process that immigrants go through and clearly affecting the way an individual feels or thinks about the self. As a means to better understand and possibly measure the difference between acculturation and biculturalism, Manuel R. Gomez (1990) states that acculturation has two extremes of a continuum. One of them is "monocultural ethnocentrism," which implies a rejection of the host culture in favor of a total or almost total identification with the ethnic culture; at the other end of the continuum stands "monocultural assimilation," which implies a rejection of the original culture in favor of a total or almost total identification with the host culture. Biculturalism is found at the middle ranges of the continuum (Gomez,

1990, p. 376). Gomez (1990) notes the difficulty for an individual to reach biculturalism, which he reports is highly dependent on receiving positive affirmation or affect in the socialization experience with the host culture. In Gomez study of biculturalism and subjective mental health, one of the variables is self-esteem, where he writes about the need for individuals to have a positive sense of self, yet more importantly a sense of continuity and belongingness to foster self-worth. In retrospect, he asserts that the degree of acculturation that immigrants acquire is likely dependent on their level of self-esteem. In addition, Gomez (1990) notes that bicultural individuals “recognize the difference between the two cultures, but they learn to accept the host culture in spite of the differences. “Learning the language, attitudes, and beliefs of the host culture and accepting its values...they gain a feeling of belonging without ever losing continuity with their ethnic identity” (p. 378). These achievements could be important variables to measure the degree or stage of biculturalism for the participants in this study. In the other hand, it can also be hypothesized that some of the participants may not be at the stage of biculturalism, but some extreme of acculturation related to what Akhtar says the immigrants tendency to “split” and devalue the host culture as a defense mechanism after their settlement.

In terms of the positive effects of immigration, Escobar (1998) who was analyzing the study by Vega et al (1993) reported that Mexican immigrants had better mental health profiles than people of Mexican descent born in the United States despite socioeconomic and educational disadvantages. Escobar notes that the study challenges long-standing beliefs in psychiatry such as “the damaging psychological effects of

immigration and the positive psychological effects of acculturation”. One of the study’s major findings was that place of birth had a more profound influence on the problem of psychiatric disorders than traditional demographic risk factors such as age, sex, or socioeconomic status. Also, Vega et al study (1993) also shows a positive effect of the retention of Mexican cultural traditions on the mental health of immigrants. In defining these concepts the intention is not to devalue one concept over another, but used those concepts in the data analysis section to assess which concept (s) tend to be more prevalent for this particular population based on their immigration experience.

#### Summary

The preceding literature reveals that identity is the basis of personal goals and motivations. Wanting to preserve one’s identity seems to be a need or propensity for every human being; thus Milligan (2003) reflects that “change of any sort is generally interpreted as a loss and, and consequently, as a disruption in identity” (p.383). This literature addresses some of the losses, adjustments, and growth experienced by people who leave behind significant frames of reference and relational contexts that sustain their identities. The circumstances and reasons for leaving one’s country of origin are also diverse and complex for every immigrant and in this study it was offered some understanding of a few general commonalities shared by some, though not all, Mexican immigrant women. Again with the relevance to this study the concept of racism and oppression are consider important factors impacting Mexican immigrant women sense of self and self-worth.

This research study examines the experiences of Mexican immigrant women and the effects of sense of identity they experience due to immigration to their United States. In doing this project, I expect to contribute to the literature and thus expand our understanding of the issues faced by Mexican immigrant women through the course of relocation and the related impact on their sense of self. This study will provide social workers greater understanding in their practices when working with a population that has been underrepresented in the literature. A point of note, the lack of research and literature on Latin-American and Mexican immigrant women is a means of oppression.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### Study Purpose and Design Research

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of 12-15 women who immigrated from Mexico to the United States. The primary study questions were based on the premise that the immigration experiences may or may not have had an impact on the sense of identity of Mexican women after immigration to the United States. Specifically, the line of inquiry was guided by one main research questions: do individuals subjectively perceive their immigration experiences as shaping their sense of self?

The researcher used a flexible, exploratory, and qualitative design. This method of study was consistent with the need to build on information on immigration and Mexican women with an “undocumented” residency status, which is a highly under-investigated area of research. The rationale for selecting a flexible study design was to allow “for the discovery of new phenomena or on the redefinition of phenomena in a way that remains close to the experiences of the research participants themselves” (Anastas, 1999, p. 57). The interview guide was based on issues generated from the literature review and other similar thesis interview guides. The interviews were audio taped and a journal log was maintained throughout the data collection process. The journal log designated areas to be further explored in the other interviews, emerging themes, and the

affect with which the information was conveyed. Each tape was coded to maintain the participants' confidentiality.

Data collection method instrument was open-ended questions that lead to a thematically analyzed narrative for each of the participants (Anastas, 1999). The interview questions were designed to focus the participants' stories around the experiences of immigration as it impacts Mexican women's self-identity. Shapiro (1994) wrote "...the personal use of reflective narratives as a way to bridge the abyss created by the major losses inherent in immigration is evident in the myriad number of autobiographies, life histories, novels, and plays about the immigration experience (p. 18). This quotation yet again describes two pertinent aspects of this study- loss and immigration. Interviews also allowed for any potential contradictory information.

#### Sample

The study was based on a focal sample of 12 women participants who self identify as Mexican immigrants. The inclusion criteria were participants who immigrated to the United States as adult women from Mexico, were 21 years of age or older (18 years old at the time of immigration), with no more than junior high education, had lived in the United States for a minimum of three years, spoke either Spanish or English, and were free of any visible, observable cognitive impairment that would make the interview process and data collection incomprehensible. The age range designated for participants as a selection inclusion was based on this researcher's interest to learn about the changes in self-identity or sense of self when the adult identity of participants has been more solidified in the native country.

The exclusion criteria were women who immigrated younger than 18, people with high school or above educational level, those who did not have a legal residency status, individuals who spoke neither Spanish nor English, are male, or had a cognitive impairment that would preclude the ability to engage in a meaningful, coherent dialogue. The study was an unmatched socio-demographic group because this concept can not easily compare across the cultural divide between North America and Mexico. The lives of the subjects, pre and post-immigration can change significantly in terms of employment, income, and social position. To enhance the study's validity, the researcher used two bilingual mentors to review the interview guide and provide feedback on the clarity and importance of questions as well as cultural understanding and accuracy of translation.

Sample recruitment took place both through direct contact from this researcher, and through the snowball method. The recruitment was done in the Denver, Colorado area. The following agencies gave permission to recruit participants: Centro la Esperanza, Focus Points Family Center, and Centro Humanitario. A pilot interview was conducted to prove the validity of the interview guide and feasibility in accessing participants. The pilot interview proved successful in generating a concise interview guide and learning about desire study's population. The information obtained in the pilot interview was integrated to the interview guide questions and proposed recruitment strategies section.

### Data Collection

In each case, the interview was conducted in person during a meeting that lasted between 50 and 60 minutes. The interview setting was a mutually convenient place with a private sitting area that was free of distraction and assured confidentiality of the tape recorded conversations. The majority of interviews were conducted in the participants' home, given their needs and preference. Interviews were conducted in Spanish, but all instruments were available in both languages. For those women who could speak both Spanish and English, the choice of language was offered.

The women first read and signed the informed consent form, then responded to the demographic questions, and finally completed the oral interview. The twelve respondents agreed to have the interview taped and they also allowed me to take notes during the interview.

The demographic survey asked the participant to provide her currently age, the age at the time of immigration, year of immigration, years living in the United States, marital status, family composition in Mexico and the U.S., education, religion, and occupation. I spoke with the participants about the content of the demographic form and interview questionnaire, the purpose of taping their stories, and my interest in the study before beginning with the interview. The twelve participants completed the demographic forms in the presence of the researcher, and only asked for clarification if the questions were unclear. One participant asked that I read the questions and fill in her answers because she has difficulty writing.

The oral interview was qualitative and flexible. I prepared a list of interview questions, which participants were asked to read before sharing their stories.



Some participant told their stories in a narrative form and included the interview questions in it, other participants preferred to follow the questions or asked me to guide them through it. I sometimes changed the sequence based on the interview itself and my learning as I progressed in the research. Each respondent shaped the interview and the nature of the conversation through her responses, and I often reframed the questions based on what the participants had already said. I sometimes added questions in order to clarify or ask more about what the participant shared. The interview questions were designed to generate the women's accounts of their immigration journeys, resettlement and impact on their sense of self.

#### Data Analysis

Data analysis began after the first interview was conducted. The researcher listened and transcribed all the interviews the day after the meeting. By transcribing them herself, she became more familiar with the participants and their story. The descriptive characteristics of the populations were generated primarily from the demographic forms. This researcher used a thematic analysis approach. I looked at themes throughout the interviews in order to understand the participants' feelings of and possible changes in their sense of self/identity after immigration. I chose themes that were salient in the participants' words; themes from each participant's narrative were examined and labeled using the most representative of the themes.

#### Ethical and Safeguards

This was an exploratory study, designed to investigate the experiences of Mexican immigrant women and the effects of sense of self they experience due to immigration to the United States. Confidentiality and anonymity was maintained throughout this study.

Confidentiality was assured by strict procedures of locking all material in a safe, secure file cabinet that only the researcher had access to. Anonymity was assured through the arrangement of a pseudonym to each participant. This pseudonym was chosen by participants, and the coding sheet was held in a separate and secure location.

A consent form describing the study and procedures was given at the time of the interview to each potential participant along with a demographic questionnaire. I clearly identified myself as a researcher and explained my interests in this study. Subjects who agreed to participate in the study returned a completed demographics questionnaire and signed consent form to the researcher at the time of the interview. A returned signed form served as a confirmation of the subject's participation. All participants were informed they have the right to refuse to answer any question or discontinue the interview up to April 1, 2007. Their request would be honor and there would be no penalty; though, all participants stayed in the study. Consent forms were kept in a file folder and the copy, separate from demographic information. No identifying information was recorded during the interview. Data was maintained in a locked file. All raw data, tapes, and notes was kept secure for three years as required by Federal regulations and then destroyed. The information provided by the participants was sufficiently disguised. Any volunteer or professional transcriber and /or anyone analyzing data needed to sign a confidentiality agreement. The researcher's advisor had access to the data after identifying information was removed. In presentation of the data, detailed vignettes and quotes was appropriately disguised.

Due to the sensitivity of this topic, the possible risks associated with this study are distress, and overwhelming feelings, such as anxiety, sadness, grief, and nostalgia,

depending on each subject's experience with their immigration transition. Another very clear risk is that of revealing legal status and having their story tape recorded by a complete stranger. Participants were notified of these potential risks in the consent form, in which local mental health agencies were included. I consciously followed to the best of my ability the three basic principles suggested by the Belmont Report. Participants were treated as autonomous agents and told about their rights in their participation; I strived to maximize possible benefits and minimize possible harms by providing them with resource information and being available to them after the interview ended.

Participants were informed that there was not material or monetary benefit. The benefits associated with this study were 1) the opportunity for participants to have their cultural transition stories heard as Mexican immigrant women 2) to contribute to the knowledge surrounding issues specific to this population that may help other immigrant people 3) to contribute to the understanding of the this population by clinicians who seek to practice cultural competency. The information that they shared helped this researcher with her own progress as a social worker. This researcher intends to work with immigrants, and have chosen to write my master's thesis to expand the literature on social work with immigrants and ethnic minorities. Furthermore, this researcher believes that services to immigrants can be improved and participants' willingness to share their story could be quite helpful. She hoped that participants would enjoy the interview and feel that they have contributed to a field of knowledge that is important but not always recognized.

### Biases and Personal Perspectives

The sample was small (12) because of difficulties with recruitment and the length of time needed to conduct and transcribe interviews. A small sample limits the generalization of the research. Nevertheless, the use of only one region (Mexico) increases the validity of findings related to nationality. The interview data reflects the participant's authentic and personal experiences of immigration and impact on their sense of self, rather than inferences through survey responses that do not represent the participants' own words and phrases.

This researcher recognized the potential for personal and methodological bias. First, it was important to note that this particular population might only spoke Spanish or preferred to speak Spanish, and, during the interview, this researcher was responsible for translations. This particular issue had both strengths and limitations. A limitation was the researcher's methodological bias at the time of translation if she could not translate a participant's words verbatim. On the other hand, this could be perceived as strength because this researcher did not require an outside party to be present for translation purposes. In order to avoid bias due to translation, this researcher consulted with other bilingual professionals regarding the use and proper translation of words/phrases and excluded any identifying information when asking for support to others. Moreover, as a Mexican woman, this researcher was also affected by this topic, as she immigrated to the United States and faced many changes in terms of identity. This can also be strength and a limitation because of the personal bias and/or lack of objectivity that can be involved when researching a topic that is of high interest and close to personal experience.

Yet, having experienced immigration herself allowed the researcher to guide the study and learn from other immigrant experiences, which prove to be very different from hers. In order to limit personal bias, this researcher followed Drisko's (1997) recommendation to increase personal self-awareness, and efforts to find contradictory data, with the purpose to develop alternative interpretation of the participant's experience (p. 191). I also needed to be cautious of my theoretical biases and learning of psychoanalytic and psychodynamic approaches to both theory and practice.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

The findings for this study are based on data derived from survey demographic and semi-structured interview questions. I modified some of the questions after conducting the first interview with the first participant to make them more precise. Using ten research questions as a guide, I asked participants to share the story of their immigration processes. In all cases, I asked additional questions to clarify or build upon the participants' disclosures. The findings are organized according to the question and by thematic salience and presented with direct quotations.

The participants used pseudonyms telling their unique stories, in order to protect their identities. In an effort to uphold the intent of exploratory research and offer close representations of participants' perspectives, the findings focus on the significant themes across interviews and are reported primarily in the participants' own words with the original Spanish version. The fidelity and integrity of the translations is assured because this researcher is fluent in the Spanish language and has an intimate knowledge of Mexican culture.

#### Study Participant Demographics

Twelve women participated in the study. All participants were from different states of Mexico. Nine women were from the North region states and three from South of Mexico. Ten of the participants immigrated to the United States when they were between the ages of 18 years to early 20s. Two participants were in their 30s and 40s.

The current age of the participants at the time of the interview ranged from 22 to 52 years. Participants have lived in the U.S. from three to eighteen years (specifically, five women have lived here for less than ten years and seven have lived here for ten or more years). Ten of the participants have not traveled back to Mexico since they have moved to the United States. Participants' time living in the U.S range from three to eighteen years. The other two participants have each visited Mexico once within the past five years. This wide span, along with other differences among participants, suggests a significant range of experience among these immigrant women.

Most of the participants were married or had been married in the past and they all have children, the only constant similarity among the group. All the participants' children live in the U.S. except for the 19 year old son of one participant who recently returned to Mexico to enroll in a college. All respondents reported that the majority of their family members, relatives, and/or close friends lived in Mexico. Yet most respondents have at least three family members or very close friends living in their current communities. The oldest respondent had only one friend living close by when she arrived in the Denver area. The other participants had at least one family member or relative that was already living in the U.S. at the time of immigrating. Four participants identified themselves as Christians, five as Catholic, and three of them mentioned other faiths.

Nine participants completed or had some middle school education and three of them had elementary education. Among these three, the participant who had lived in the U.S. the longest, completed her GED. She named her story "Triunfadora" meaning "Successful" and just like her pseudonym indicates she works as a cosmetology instructor

and an addictions counselor. She noted that her goal was to obtain her bachelors degree in Psychology. Other women identified their occupations as homemaker, yet additionally, all of them were students or teacher assistants. Some of the respondents had or have had their own businesses at one point. One participant, the oldest and the one with the least education (third grade education), reports she had been a prestigious fashion designer in Mexico. Eight of the participants reported they knew some English and were currently attending English classes. Three reported they knew some English and planned to continue to study. One reported that she spoke English well, yet wanted to perfect it. All participants felt more comfortable speaking Spanish and preferred to complete their interview in this language.

### The Oral Interview: Immigration and Identity

#### Reasons for Immigrating

The initial interview questionnaire asked participants to share their reasons for immigrating in order to elicit a beginning, middle, and an end in the participants' stories and to establish rapport between the participants and this researcher. The reasons for immigrating were diverse and each sounded complicated and difficult. The reasons also were multiple and differed in the range of priorities or needs. Although each woman's life history had unfolded uniquely according to her personality, familial traits, her social environment, and the period of history that she experienced, similarities were observed across the group. Most of the participants talked about having one or two initial motives in immigrating to the United States. The immigration fell into two categories: immigrations that were motivated or planned by the women and those immigrations that were motivated or caused by another person—usually a spouse or parent.



Maria, Soñadora, Triunfadora, Amor, and Esperanza were self-motivated to immigrate to the U.S. These self-motivated immigrations involved a cognitive and emotional decision, that is, the decision to move came from within the women themselves. Raquel, Ruth, Mariposa, and Michele were externally motivated and immigration occurred as a result of another person's decision, usually their husbands or parents. In the cases of Alba, Conchita, and Libertad, their immigrations were motivated by internal and external influences. It is important to clarify the relationship between the actual move and the reason for the move in order to better determine whether the move was internally or externally motivated. There is an extensive range of difference in experience in the extent to which people control their life events. In situations of self-motivated or internally motivated immigrations, women reported feeling more in control of their lives and, thus, felt better about themselves. For the participants whose immigration was influenced by another person, they presented a more difficult time adapting to the new environment. These women typically had a lower self-esteem and depression symptoms.

Eight out of the twelve participants reported that one of their reasons to leave Mexico was to join or accompany partners and/or family members. Seven identified socioeconomic opportunities as a major motivator to immigrate and four talked about the search for new opportunities, like educational and labor.

Alba immigrated at age 25 and would not have left Mexico if her husband had not needed to come to the U.S. to sustain his family. Her decision was influenced by her desire and values to maintain her family together. She said:

I was pregnant and we did not have money to buy the indispensable things for the baby, so he left a month before the baby was born. A few months later, I decided

to immigrate to join my husband... I knew crossing the border would be hard, yet I preferred to suffer a little so my child could have a father.

Yo estaba embarazada y mi esposo se tuvo que venir un mes antes de que naciera mí bebe, porque no teníamos para comprarle lo indispensable. Algunos meses después yo decidí emigrar para estar con mi esposo...Yo sabia que cruzar era difícil, pero prefería sufrir un poquito para que mi hijo tuviera un padre.

Alba's primary choice reflected the forces and limitations that other eight participants faced in their decisions to leave Mexico. Alba talked about her reason to come to the United State as a deed, which was not completely voluntary, yet forced by her values and needs. Many of the participants including Alba had planned to stay for a few months to a year then go back to Mexico. One of them reported not knowing if she and her parents would stay or go back, so there was a lot of ambivalence in her life. For most, the reasons to come were described as weighing more than the unknown risks they could encounter by crossing the border illegally.

Eight of the participants entered the country illegally through different high risk methods, like walking several hours or days through the dessert, hiding inside the trunk of a car and through drainage tubes. Some of them talked about this experience with ease, but all indicated that crossing the border had an impact on how they felt about themselves. Some of the participants decided to describe the journey literally. The intense uncertainty and fear about losing their lives and/or the lives of their children was a common characteristic among participants who crossed the border illegally. Alba was asked to leave her four month old baby for two days with the "coyote," who is the person who escorts people without legal documentation across the border. She talked about never seeing this person but had been contracted by her husband to help them cross the

border illegally. She says “I won’t go back to Mexico until I forget that experience!” It was the greatest challenge of her life, which she handled with bravery and courage.

Several other women talked about the difficulties of obtaining a legal permit or tourist visa. Four of the participants came with a visa and after their permits expired they decided to stay, since they did not want to risk getting another permit. Three of the women who entered illegally met the requirements to obtain a legal permit to enter the country. However, they were denied getting legal permits for what they described as “inconsistency of the system, abuse, and bad luck.” For those who took the dangerous journey across the Mexican border to the USA, their reasons were based on the denial of legal means for entry.

Soñadora came illegally inside the trunk of a car and during the oral interview she reflected on her journey of crossing the border as the only negative aspect of the whole immigration experience. Her story reflects others who talked of coming to the United States because it held the promise of a country of new opportunities, “el pais de las oportunidades.” This journey of danger and risk was based on the desire to follow their unfulfilled dreams. It is the unlimited desire of Soñadora who chose to leave at age 20 with a dream to better herself and do the things that she could not do in Mexico.

When I arrived here I was very excited!...I lived in a small town in Mexico; I had a job in an American factory but did not earn enough to do what I wanted to do. There in my town! One only moves from work to one’s house or get married. I felt I was getting restrained (stocked), I wasn’t growing, my dreams were dying, perhaps because of the age discrimination that exist in the country. I wanted to study computers and finish high school, yet I could not do it because I was over 18. I wanted to come here because I knew I would have more opportunities to become what I wanted to be.

Quando llegue aquí yo me super emocione!...Yo vivía en un pueblito en México y trabajaba en una fabrica Americana pero no ganaba lo suficiente como pare hacer

lo que yo quería. Allá en mi pueblo, uno solo pasa de trabajar e ir a la casa, o casarse. Yo me sentía estancada, no estaba creciendo, y mis sueños se morían, quizás por la discriminación que existe en el país, de que si ya tienes cierta edad no puedes hacer mucho. Yo quería estudiar computación y terminar mi preparatoria, pero no podía porque era mayor de 18 años. Yo quería venirme para acá porque yo sabía que aquí tendría más oportunidades de llegar a ser lo que yo quería.

Also, motivated by the well known opportunities and protection that women receive in the U.S. -three of the participants' main reason to leave Mexico was driven by their need to seek refugee from abuse at the hands of a family member. Maria the oldest of the participants, age 52, came to Denver seven years ago with the help of her siblings and her best friend. Maria talked about her reasons to immigrate as a "life or death" decision:

For me coming here was a fact of life or death, because even though my economic situation was stable in Mexico, the situation with my husband was terrible. He is alcoholic and extremely violent...there were daily problems with insults and physical aggression...it was violence of all kinds...I felt I was losing my mind and control...[pause] Three other times in the past we had separated, yet he would convince me to go back with him again and again every time the abuse would be worse than before...I knew that in order to end with this, it was not enough with moving from one state to another because he would find me, so I decided to come here.

Para mi el venirme aquí fue un echo de vida o muerte, porque a pesar que mi situación económica en México era estable, la situación con mi esposo era terrible. El es alcohólico y extremadamente violento...había problemas diarios con insultos y agresión física...era una violencia en todos los sentidos...Yo me sentía a punto de volverme loca y perder el control... [pausa] En otras tres ocasiones nos habíamos separado, pero el siempre terminaba convenciéndome para que regresara con el, y cada vez el abuso era peor que antes... Yo sabía que para poner tierra de por medio no era cuestión de moverme de un estado a otro porque me encontraría, entonces decide venirme para acá.

Two other participants talked about leaving Mexico for safety reasons, believing that the United States would provide them with the women's rights and opportunities

they did not have in their native country. A few months before she turned 18, Amor went to a party with her friends where someone put a drug in her drink and later she was sexually abused and made pregnant by one of her cousins.

At the beginning of the oral interview, Amor focused on her feelings and thoughts about this traumatic experience. She said she was “young, perhaps irresponsible, and fearful of the stigma of what people would say.” She felt she could not tell her family or the authorities because she was afraid they would blame her; she also thought of the family loyalty. After trying unsuccessfully to cause a miscarriage with different methods, Amor decided to immigrate legally to the U.S. to have an abortion:

I came because I wanted to have an abortion and I knew here you have more access to do so; the clinic charged me \$300, so my plan was to have the abortion and go back to Mexico, as if nothing had happened. When I was four months pregnant I went to the clinic to get it done, but after seeing my baby in the screen, completely formed, I told myself... “oh my God! what am I doing...I can’t do this”... I decided to have my child and stay in the United States to provide him with a better quality of life.

Yo vine porque quería practicarme un aborto, y sabía que aquí uno tiene más acceso para hacer eso. La clínica me cobraba \$300 dólares, entonces mi plan era el tener el aborto y regresarme para México, como si nada hubiera pasado. Cuando ya tenía cuatro meses de embarazo voy a la clínica lista a que lo hagan, pero después de ver a mí bebe en la pantalla, completamente formado, me dije... “Oh! Dios mío que estoy haciendo...yo no puedo hacer esto”... Decidí tener a mi bebe y quedarme en los Estados Unidos para proveerle con una mejor calidad de vida.

Even though she came with a specific purpose and planned to go back with her family, her decision changed within a few months when new reasons to stay emerged. This change in plans was apparent with most participants. They came with a primary

motive to “join the family, find new outlets for growth, save some money, and go back” but later discovered other benefits that encouraged them to stay in Denver.

Interestingly, four of the participants lived briefly in California before they migrated to the Denver area. They reported they had arrived in California because they had family there, though they had liked Denver’s landscape, the quiet/safe neighborhoods, higher salaries, and affordable living expenses compared to California. All twelve participants immigrated to the United States because they had relatives or close friends that already resided here. Four of them also came because of solid job offers.

The process of the complicated immigration journeys resulted in women’s challenges. In some cases, immigrating meant maintaining who they were in relationship. Alba and six other participants talked about being a wife, a mother, and/or not wanting to be part of a stigmatized single mother groups in Mexico. Certainly, wanting to maintain or obtain a desired sense of who they were was a reason for immigrating.

#### Positive Changes that Immigrating Made in Their Life

Participants talked about the many benefits that immigration brought to their lives. These benefits included mental, emotional, spiritual, economic, and for some physical wellness. The United States offered the participants the opportunity to work regardless of their age or educational level, and therefore meet their basic needs. But their move to this country also helped them accomplish other dreams. For Soñadora, coming to the U.S. was the greatest opportunity of her life given the age discrimination she experienced in Mexico. She commented on the difficulties that people over 18

experience in Mexico to find a job and continue education. Just like Soñadora, Ruth age 40 also talked about age discrimination in Mexico and her ability to find a job here and help her husband get an eye surgery.

All participants shared what it was like for them to live in Mexico compared it to what they have accomplished and become since coming to the United States. During the interview, Soñadora was full of emotion, comparing the limitations and opportunities she had in Mexico and what she has obtained here. She remembered telling her mother, “Mother, I will move ahead, study, and marry someone –not from here—maybe from Spain, the U.S—un gringo (laughing) my mother would respond...ahy mija! You are a dreamer.” Dreamer, or Soñadora, reflected on her accomplishments from the early times when she had just arrived and started to work.

Everything has been good in immigrating to the U.S... in Mexico I felt unhappy because I wanted to travel, meet new people...I never left my town because I did not have the money to do so—money is a priority! I arrived to California and I began to work (her sight focused at a window, as if she connected into her memories, smiling)...I used to say with this money I can help my family, buy this or that...I could buy myself little treats that I couldn't there. Later I registered in a school to learn English; I began to visit a bunch of beautiful places and met new people. I started to read books and do so many great things that I couldn't do in Mexico... I felt happier; I was achieving something for myself besides just working.

Todo me ha sido bueno en haberme venido para los Estados Unidos... En México me sentía amargada porque yo quería viajar, conocer gente nueva...y nunca sales de tu pueblo porque no tenía dinero- lo económico es lo primero! Llegue a California y empecé a trabajar (su mirada estaba enfocada en la ventana, concentrada en sus memorias, y sonriendo) ...yo decía con este dinero puedo ayudar a mi familia, comprar esto o lo otro... comprarme lujitos que allá no puedes darte. Después me registre en la escuela para aprender Ingles; comencé a conocer un montón de lugares y cosas bellas, gente nueva. Empecé a leer libros y hacer tantas cosas que no podía hacer allá. Me sentí más feliz, estaba logrando algo para mi misma, aparte de trabajar.

Soñadora did accomplish her dreams; she is happily married to someone from El Salvador, and they have two children. Since all participants are mothers, for them the economy of this country, the many community organizations, resources, and having a job has helped them fulfill the responsibilities of being mothers and not having to depend solely on a partner or stay in abusive relationships. In particular, for single mothers Raquel, Libertad, and Triunfadora, these resources have been one of the most important benefits along with not being stigmatized by society because of their marital status.

Triunfadora said:

I became stronger in immigrating to the United States... I told myself... (with strength in her voice) my children and I are going to make it...I am going to learn the language, I am going to prepare myself... I obtained a force I wouldn't get in Mexico because being a single mother in Mexico...you are pointed, criticized... nobody helps you, but on this other side...no. Here I looked at the opportunity to move ahead—a world full of opportunities!

Yo me hice mas fuerte cuando emigre para los Estados Unidos...Yo me dije... (Con fuerza en su voz) “mis hijos y yo vamos hacerla”... voy a prender el idioma, voy a prepararme... me dio la fuerza alzo que no me hubiera dado en México porque ser madre soltera allá... eres apuntada, criticada, nadie te ayuda, pero de este lado...no. Aquí yo mire la oportunidad de salir adelante—un mundo lleno de oportunidades!

Three other participants also talked about their fear of becoming a single mother or becoming “one more” woman abandoned in Mexico when her husband leaves for the United States to sustain his family in Mexico, but never goes back. Not wanting to be “una mas” is a motivation and benefit of living in the U.S., as well as having family living here to provide the emotional ties, comfort, and support. When asked about the positive changes that have resulted from immigrating, Alba said:

I don't feel the loneliness that I would feel there...if I had stayed in Mexico...um I would have seven years without seeing my husband... It's a big change, don't



you think! (Laughing) I told him: “I won’t be one more that gets married- the husband here and the wife there.

No siento la soledad que sentiría si estuviera allá...si me hubiera quedado en México...um...tuviera siete años sin ver a mi esposo... ¡Es un cambio muy grande no cree! (Riéndose)... Yo le dije: “yo no seré una mas de las que se casan- el esposo acá y uno allá.”

Participants indicate that the stigma of being single mothers, from of a lower socio economic background, and being oppressed as women was less in the U.S. than in Mexico. Immigrating has given these women the space and opportunity to “make a fresh start.” It is exactly what Conchita described as “volver a empezar:”

... even though starting all over again has many cons, this country offers immigrants an opportunity to learn from mistakes, since everybody comes in the same terms...if failed in a relationship, Oh well! I would try to do it differently this time. People may regret... if I only had paid attention at school and finish high school ...if I had learned more English... coming here gave me an opportunity to try my best...new opportunities, new learning, cultures, languages, and people.

...a pesar que empezar desde el principio tiene muchos cons, este país le ofrece a los imigrantes la oportunidad de aprender de sus errores, ya que todos venimos en las mismas condiciones... “si fallo en una relacion, “Oh pues bien! Tratare de hacerle un poquito diferente esta vez.” Hay personas que quizás les pesa... “si solo hubiera puesto atención en la escuela y terminado la preparatoria...si solo hubiera aprendido Ingles...” el venirme aquí me dio la oportunidad de dar lo mejor de mi...nuevas oportuidades, nuevo aprendizaje, culturas, lenguajes, y gente.

At age twenty-two, Conchita is the youngest of all the participants, having immigrated three years ago. She talked about living in a small city neighborhood, going to church as a youngster but later stopped going to church to live her life outside the church norms. When wanting to go back, she felt condemned and ashamed to return to her spiritual life. In coming to the U.S., the first thing she did was to look for a church,

knowing that nobody knew her. Her immigration to the U.S. offered her the opportunity to fulfill this important area of her life.

Similar to Conchita, Amor, Soñadora, Ruth, Esperanza, and Alba talked about regaining their spirituality, which they consider a major aspect of who they are and a source of their strength as immigrant women. Soñadora talked about the many changes that she accomplished through her decision to come here and her relationship with God, who supported her through the difficult moments and gave her a positive outlook in her daily life. In thinking what would be beneficial to support immigrant women with similar experiences, Soñadora noted that the statistics tell that spirituality can help immigrant women overcome depression- “it has helped me” (“a mi me ha ayudado”). Amor spoke of her spiritual experience after she decided to keep her baby and feeling embraced by God’s spirit.

In addition to the comfort and protection obtained after immigration, all participants talked about the personal growth achieved. They talked about it in terms of feeling self-actualized, feeling capable, and dreaming again; consequently their self-esteem, emotional, and moral well-being increased. Amor, who decided to stay in Denver after her baby was born, stated that “Being a woman, I have felt capable, responsible...knowing that I can sustain myself; it has been difficult at times but I will continue” (siendo mujer, me siento util, responsable...sabiendo que puedo mantenerme yo sola. Ha sido difícil muchas veces pero aquí sigo adelante). Esperanza spoke during her interview about the motivation and encouragement she has received from different individuals, who are role models and provide inspiration to pursue her dreams. In fact,

as her selected pseudonym (Esperanza/Faith) for the study, reflects her immigration journey as the opportunity to dream again:

In Mexico, perhaps people conform and give up to their dreams because we have to, the socioeconomic level dictates how much you can accomplish...Here in the United States you can dream and accomplish!... here if you want, you can have a big beautiful house, an educational career...you can! You have higher goals and you can achieve them!

En México, quizás la gente se conforma y no lucha por sus sueños porque tenemos que, el nivel socioeconómico dicta que tanto puedes lograr... aquí en los Estados Unidos puedes soñar y alcanzar tus metas!...puedes tener una casa grande y bonita, una carrera universitaria...tu lo puedes hacer! Tienes metas más altas, y lo puedes lograr!

Triunfadora also spoke of the personal and professional growth that she has achieved after 18 years of living in the U.S.

...nothing has stopped me from growing...I don't have documents...yes! I do want them and wish for them every day, yet I have done what I wanted to. If until now, nobody has stopped me from attaining my goals what would happen when I change my legal status—I will eat the world! (Laughs) I have been learning English, I got my GED studying at home with three kids, got a cosmetology license, a substance abuse license...and I am not going to stop until I become a psychologist. These are great things for which I have paid the price, and I feel pride and satisfaction...

...nada me ha detenido de seguir creciendo...no tengo papeles...si! Los quisiera, es algo que deseo todos los dias, pero aun así he logrado lo que me he propuesto. Si hasta ahora, nadie me ha detenido de obtener mis metas que será cuando mi status legal cambie—yo me voy a comer el mundo! (riéndose) He estado aprendiendo inglés, obtuve mi GED estudiando en casa con tres hijos, conseguí mi licencia de cosmetóloga, y de consejera de drogas...y no voy a para hasta llegar a ser una psicóloga. Estas son las cosas buenas por las cuales he pagado el precio, y me siento orgullosa y satisfecha...

In thinking about her undocumented legal status and the current immigration problems, Triunfadora talks about her past and present life and how this condition leads her to experience two different “senses of self.” She fears going back to Mexico and confronting who she was in Mexico and who she has become:

I am afraid of going back to Mexico...I came when I was 20 years old, I am 38 now... I have lived here most of my life. Here, I am mature, the one that knows who she is... Back in Mexico, I only lived because I lived, I didn't know what I wanted, I couldn't decide the way I do know... I have grown matured. My whole life is here! Even though I have professional licenses, I ask myself: what am I going to do in Mexico, how am I going to live...I don't remember.

Tengo miedo de ir para México... yo me vine cuando tenia 20 años, ahorita tengo 38... Yo he vivido la mayor parte de mi vida aquí... Aquí yo soy la madura, la que sabe quien es...en México, yo solo vivía porque vivía, no sabia lo que quería, no podía decidir como lo hago ahora... he crecido, madurado. Mi vida entera esta aquí! A pesar de que tengo mis licencias, yo me pregunto: que voy hacer en México, como voy a vivir...ya no me acuerdo.

Triunfadora thinks of her past and present self as if she was two different individuals, unknown to one another, yet the same. She loves who she has become in the United States and does not remember reconnecting the identity of being professional with being a young, abused, and immature girl, perhaps because she never went back physically to revisit her past.

Just like Triunfadora, Conchita, Alba, Libertad, Michele, and Maria spoke of the experience of getting to know themselves- finding who they really were and exploring not only the new landscape of the city but their potential in the new land. Maria with seven years living in Denver said:

I love Denver...it's a beautiful city...here I have learned to value myself, believe once again that I still can achieve whatever I set myself to...after leaving the abuse with my husband and migrating to the United States it was like finding myself...I feel calm, young, and capable.

Amo a Denver...es una ciudad hermosa...aquí he aprendido a valorarme, creer que puedo otra vez alcanzar cualquier cosa que me proponga...después de dejar el abuso que mi esposo me daba y emigrar para los Estados Unidos fue como encontrarme a mi misma...me siento tranquila, joven, y útil.

Libertad who also suffered domestic violence said: "I feel very happy because I am moving ahead...I may get my documents- I didn't know I had rights!" ("Me siento

muy contenta porque estoy saliendo adelante...quizás me den mis documentos- yo no sabia que tenia derechos!”)

### Challenges and Growth

All participants reported that the differing immigration processes and diverse challenges in resettlement brought out the best of them in different ways. For Maria her sense of pride about being a fashion designer was challenged. She spoke with sadness about the difficulties of finding a job as a fashion designer, just like she had in Mexico. Since she did not know the language and did not have legal documentation, she was forced to do other labor intensive jobs, yet she grew in her strength and loved her freedom to do whatever it takes to succeed, which does not change who she is:

When I arrived here...I felt...um...bad...humiliated...when I had to clean at work because I never did it before...yes, I did it at my home, but never for other people...I was a fashion designer...well known...with a large clientele....and here...I was basically working as a home maid... I did not let it put me down...I told myself “you don’t know the language, you will have to work on whatever you need in order to move ahead”...I did...I worked hard...and feel stronger because I learned how much I am worth...I don’t feel humiliated anymore if I have to clean the restroom or the floor... those are things that don’t change who I am...

Cuando llegue aquí... yo me sentí...um... mal... humillada... cuando tenia que limpiar en el trabajo, porque yo nunca había hecho eso...si, limpiaba mi propia casa, pero nunca para otros...yo era una diseñadora muy cotizada...con mucha clientela...y aquí... básicamente estaba trabajando como una sirvienta... no deje que eso me afectara...y me dije “no sabes Ingles, vas a tener que trabajar en lo que sea para salir adelante”...así lo hice... trabaje duro...y hoy me siento mas fuerte porque aprendí cuanto valgo... ya no me siento humillada si tengo que limpiar el baño o el piso... esas cosas no cambian quien soy yo...

All women reported that one of the major challenges in the process of resettling was to experience discrimination. Conchita spoke of the experience of being an immigrant in the U.S. and the discrimination experienced because of her brown skin

color and her limited language skills. Throughout the interview Conchita talked with high energy and a good sense of humor about the many changes experienced in her life after immigrating.

People looked at me and commented—look at her “a mexicanita,” black hair and dark skin— yet in Mexico I wasn’t that dark! (looking confused- but joking)— I was “morenita clara— I was normal”...that was killing my self-esteem (laughing)-- who I thought I was!

Gente me miraba y comentaba—mira esa “mexicanita, cabello negro y prieta”— pero si en México yo no estaba tan morena! (con una mirada de confusión- juguetona)—yo era “morenita clara—era normal”...eso estaba matando mi autoestima (riéndose)-- quien yo pensaba que era!

The different experiences of being discriminated challenged her. This resulted in growth and reflection on being a young woman living in Mexico. It further led to personal reflection about her own racist attitude and lack of empathy towards people who looked different or were from a lower socioeconomic class. In the same humorous way, she spoke of how judgmental she had been with others and the disparity of receiving similar treatment from others when immigrating to the U.S.

In Mexico, my friends and I used to put down people ... I would criticize them because they were from other states and perhaps make ...inaccurate judgments about where they lived, about the way they dressed, their accent, or their dark physical complexions...I was rude...(looking thoughtful) I changed!...my attitude and heart changed, um...I don’t know what had a greater impact on that change...maybe this country, the racism, or the church...they made me understand... Ey! everybody is equal, you don’t have to be racist...but I did not understand that until I came here...now I feel proud of being a dark Mexican woman...and I look at people from Mexico and feel happy to help them, especially the ones who have less time living here and don’t know how to move around...

En México, mis amigos y yo acostumbrabamos humillar a la gente... yo los criticaba porque eran de otros estados y quizá hasta... juzgaba sin conocer en donde Vivian, sobre como se vestían, el asiento, o porque tenia complexiones oscuras... yo era despectiva... (pensativamente) he cambiado! Mi actitud y

corazón han cambiado, um...no se que fue lo que creo mas impacto...el país, el racismo, o la iglesia...porque te hacen saber que “oyes, pues si eres igual, no tienes porque ser racista”... pero no entendía eso hasta que estaba acá... ahora me siento orgullosa de ser una Mexicana morena...y veo a la gente de México y me siento contenta de poder ayudarles, especialmente aquellos que tienen menos tiempo viviendo aquí y no conocen como moverse de un lado a otro...

Ruth also reflected on the positive changes that she obtained due to the many challenges said:

I believe one is force by the circumstances...the people...the system...forced to say...I am going to make it- succeed!... I am not going to conform... I can do more!... they force you to defend yourself... become more assertive...God has taught me that I have the strength to overcome what I have overcome and even more...

Yo pienso que uno es forzada por las circunstancias... la gente... el sistema... forzada a decir... Yo la voy hacer!... no me voy a quedar aquí... yo se que puedo hacer mas!... te forzan a saber desenvolverse, ser mas asertiva...Dios me ha enseñado que tengo la fortaleza para sobrellevar lo que he pasado y aun mas...

In overcoming the many obstacles, Ruth, Mariposa, Raquel, Esperanza and others also learned about their hidden strengths. The areas where they may need to change, and passion to become the best they can. An important change through this complex process was the reinforcement and integration of new roles. For example, becoming a helper or confidante for those people who have a similar experience. Alba, Ruth, Soñadora, Triunfadora, Mariposa, Maria, and Esperanza talked about a growing altruistic drive after their many unfortunate experiences. Alba identified this as part of a commitment because of the values that her parents taught her, “If I suffered, I need to share that experience with others so they don’t have to go through the same” (“si yo sufrí, tengo que compartirlo con otros para que ellos no tengan que pasar por lo que yo pasé”). Alba spoke of her cousin’s traumatic experience, crossing the border through the dessert, she said:

We always call one another...perhaps because we keep those memories very close to our hearts, it’s sad, but it helps us become stronger, learn to value the little or a lot we accomplish...fully enjoyed, sharing and giving a hand to those in need...That’s part of our history... what makes us strong...who we are...I had it

difficult coming! But one has to give the best effort!! As long as God allows, we will continue to move forward...

Siempre nos hablamos...quizá porque tenemos ese recuerdo muy guardado, cerca del corazón, es triste, pero nos ayuda a hacernos mas fuertes, a valorar lo poquito o mucho que hagamos, bien disfrutado, compartiendo y echándoles una mano a los que necesitan... es parte de nuestra historia... lo que nos hace fuertes...quienes somos... yo batalle para venir! Pero hay que echarle ganas!! Mientras Dios nos permita, seguiremos adelante...

In Alba's story, just like in Ruth's and others there is a sense of belonging to a community- the immigrant, Mexican, Latino community with a shared history, suffering, yet powerful, driven, and full of love.

Other positive changes came with the struggle to define their roles as women, wives, daughters, etc. in a different more liberal/feminist culture. Michele left her family in her mid 20's to be with her husband, talked about her transition in becoming more independent and wonders what she would be like if she had stayed in Mexico:

When I arrived here, I would call my mother almost every day...crying "I want to go back, I don't want to be here...I don't know anybody...it is too difficult" ... but my mom would say "mija: you need to stay with your husband"... as time pass by I learned not to depend so much on my mother...I changed perhaps for all the set backs I encounter here and the need to support my husband financially...I become more independent and stronger...I am not the same I used to be...perhaps if I had stayed in Mexico I would be still the same?...

Cuando yo llegue aquí, yo le llamaba todos los dias a mi mamá...llorando... "ya me quiero regresar, no quiero estar aquí... no conozco a nadie... es muy difícil"... pero mi mama me decía: "mija: tienes que permanecer a lado de tu esposo"... como fue pasando el tiempo aprendí a no depender tanto de mi madre... cambie quizá por todos los obstáculos encontrados aquí y la necesidad de apoyar a mi esposo financieramente... me he vuelto mas independiente y fuerte... no soy la misma que era ante...quizá si me hubiera quedado en México seguiría siendo igual?...



Alba also spoke of reveling against the traditional role of a staying at home mother, as she tried to help her husband and children and the conflicts that doing something outside the norm of a traditional marriage can create in the relationship:

When my son was a baby, I wanted to enroll myself in school to learn English, but my husband did not let me perhaps because he was afraid I would not finish my chores at home...I said ok... six years passed and my child came from school asking for help to do his homework...I told my son to go with his father he knows a lot that's why he did not allow me to learn...he understood why I wanted to learn... I told him don't expect me to ask you permission; I am going to school because I need it, and my son too... Before I used to ask to do anything, but not now! ... this is not the time to be like woman in the past... I have learned to strive for what I want especially if it can benefit my family! I feel I am fighting against wind and sea!

Cuando mi hijo era un bebe, yo quería inscribirme en la escuela y aprender Ingles, pero mi esposo no me dejo quizá porque tenia miedo que no iba terminar con mis labores de la casa...yo le dije esta bien... seis años después mi hijo viene de la escuela pidiéndome ayuda con su tarea...yo le dije que fuera con su papa porque el sabia mucho y por eso no quiso que yo aprendiera... mi esposo entendió porque yo quería aprender....yo le dije no esperes que te pida permiso; yo voy a ir a la escuela porque lo necesito, y mi hijo me necesita...antes acostumbraba pedir permiso para todo, pero no ahora! no es tiempo de estar como las de antes... aprendí a luchar por lo que quiero...especialmente si beneficia a mi familia...siento que estoy luchando contra viento y marea!

### Difficulties that Immigrating Created on Their Life

As participants shared the greatest difficulties or things that had not gone well through their immigration experiences, Alba, Ruth, Triunfadora, Mariposa, Amor, and Maria also talked about their memories of crossing the border. Participants mentioned knowing other people or hearing stories of people who had a more difficult time crossing the border than they, yet all their stories indicated complicated and emotionally charged journeys. Soñadora with a sorrow expression on her face shared:

I thank God because I did not have to suffer in the cold weather, walk hours through the desert without food and thirsty, yet I came hidden in the trunk of a car and almost suffocated... (Took a deep breath and looked up) but I was able to come and I am here now.

Yo le doy gracias a Dios porque yo no sufrí frío, ni tuve que caminar horas por el desierto sin comida y agua, pero si pase en un carro escondida en la cajuela y casi me ahogo... (Toma un poco de aire y mira hacia arriba) pero logre pasar y aquí estoy.

The unpleasant experience did not improve at the time of resettlement for many of them. Ruth, Triunfadora, Michele, Libertad, and Mariposa reported unkind living situations they dealt with for a couple of months. Triunfadora reported that after crossing the border and walking through drainage tubes she had to live in a garage with her three minor children and ten other people. Michele's situation was also stressful, referring to herself and her husband, she noted:

We didn't have anything...anything...we arrived at the home of a lady known by my husband...it was hard!...with six months of pregnancy, we had to sleep on the floor...later we moved in with my husband's niece, but soon she started to dislike the cries of the baby and again we moved in with another relative, until we were able to afford a place of our own... I felt disliked and worthless, which was something I had never experienced before...

No teníamos nada...nada... llegamos a la casa de una señora conocida de mi esposo...fue muy difícil!...con seis meses de embarazo teníamos que dormir en el suelo...después nos movimos con la sobrina de mi esposo, pero pronto ella se fastidio de los llantos de mi hija y otra vez nos movimos con otro familiar, hasta que pudimos completar para rentar nuestro propio lugar... yo me sentía detestada, como si no tuviera valor, es algo que nunca antes lo había sentido...

Ruth talked about how the living situation at her new arrival impacted her sense of self and self-esteem. Similarly to others she experienced a feeling of powerlessness and oppression, she said:

We lived "de arrimados"...I was the babysitter, the "maid" "criada"...eating what they wanted to eat, doing what they wanted or needed from us to do... I was

living a life that wasn't mine, it was other's because we didn't have a life of our own.

Vivíamos de arrimados...yo era la niñera, la criada...comiendo lo que los demás querían, haciendo lo que ellos necesitaban...viviendo la vida de otras personas porque no vivíamos la de nosotros mismos.

For Libertad, she did not think twice about coming after hearing the extraordinary invitation of her aunt to come to the U.S. However, she had to work for her aunt for two years "to pay her back" before she was able to leave her house. Libertad said "she took advantage of me, I would clean, cook, and take care of the kids 24 hours...I could not go out because they worked long hours...she would pay me \$50 per week... I wasn't living my life...I felt depressed" ("ella se aprovecho de mi, yo limpiaba, cocinaba, y cuidaba de los niños 24 horas... yo no salía a pasear porque ellos trabajaban mucho...ella me pagaba \$50 dólares por semana...yo no estaba viviendo mi vida, me sentía deprimida").

In fact, the twelve participants reported receiving a lot of abuse and violations from relatives and other people. They associated this maltreatment with their lack of legal documentation and protection. Libertad saw her experience as the payment she had to make because her relatives paid for her to come illegally. Libertad also noted that she would not have been taken advantage of if she had legal documentation and protection. The lack of legal status set the stage for discrimination and victimization, which contributed to their fears and internalized oppression and resulted in a threat to their identity - sense of self. Because of fear of retaliation or deportation they did not report violations; they did not speak up, yet the sentiment stayed with them affecting how they feel about themselves. Three participants did report medical negligence, though never resolved by the authorities. When asked what had not gone well in her immigration

process, Maria immediately referred to the medical assistance received, then she described how at the hospital the doctors did “an urgent surgery”:

...I understand English well, some of the doctors examining me...said, “we can do the surgery, yet we don’t know if she can afford it”...thinking I couldn’t understand anything... one of the doctors called the insurance and it covered 100%. Since they told me it was urgent, I didn’t have time to consult other doctors...they did the rapid laser eye surgery...I don’t know why, I think they used me as an experiment (guine-pig). My eye turned out to be a different color and got small, I lost my sight, and they denied me all appointments, saying they didn’t know what had happened, and the “specialist” was never there...later because of the legal documents, I had to quit my job because they said immigration was coming...it was a medical negligence.

...yo entiendo Ingles bien, algunos de los doctores que me examinaban...dijeron, “podemos hacer la operación pero no sabemos si la puede pagar”...pensaban que no entendía nada...uno de los doctores pregunto si mi aseguranza cubría al 100%. Como me dijeron que era de urgencia, yo no tuve tiempo de consultar con otro doctor...ellos hicieron una rápida cirugía láser en mi ojo...yo no entiendo porque, yo pienso que me utilizaron como experimento. Mi ojo cambio de color, se hizo chiquito, yo perdí mi vista, y ellos me negaron todas las citas, diciendo que no sabían lo que había pasado, y el “especialista” nunca estaba... después por los papeles tuve que dejar el trabajo, porque supuestamente estaban checando la imigracion.

Maria was still unclear about the urgency of the surgery, yet everything indicated to her it had been a medical negligence.

Michele spoke of two different instances where she felt discriminated because she did not have a state I.D. The first one was when she requested her newborn’s birth certificate, she said:

...even showing several Mexican documents they denied my son of his birth certificate... you can’t imagine how I felt!... (with tears on her eyes)...my dignity was destroyed...I felt really bad... it had my name and picture...they denied it...just as if I was a delinquent person ... I didn’t want to go back to that office, even though my son has the right...but I was afraid...what if!...no...I was afraid.

...a pesar de haber mostrado varios documentos Mexicanos ellos le negaron a mi hijo su certificado de nacimiento... no se imagina como me sentí!... (con lagrimas

en sus ojos)... mi dignidad se fue a los suelos... me sentí muy mal... tenia mi nombre y mi foto...me la negaron...me sentí así como si fuera un delincuente... yo no quise regresar ahí, a pesar de que mi hijo tiene el derecho...pero tuve miedo...de peligro hasta!....no...Tuve miedo.

During the entire interview Michele was greatly involved wanting to answer all the questions. She was passionate while sharing her story, as if she was making justice to the many violations suffered. In her quote above, she was remembering the helplessness and rage she felt at her inability to prove she was Michele, the same person that the several I.D.s with pictures were showing. Then she continued and said: “recently my husband needed to go and pay some money to the IRS and again since we didn’t have a Colorado I.D. we couldn’t go up to the third floor, someone had to come down and see us...as if we were criminals” (“hace poco mi esposo necesitaba ir a pagar un dinero al IRS y como no tenemos una I.D. de Colorado no nos permitieron subir al tercer piso, alguien tenia que bajar a vernos...asi como si fuéramos criminals”). Michele spoke about her desire to talk and said that it was an injustice but she feared someone would retaliate and she could be hurt. Michele reflected on who she was in Mexico - the confidence in who she was there and her rights. In Mexico, she defined and admired herself for her self-determination and boldness to call out injustices, yet in a foreign country those personal assets of her identity had to be suppressed--that in itself feels oppressive.

Ten of the participants talked about the discrimination they experienced from other Latinos or minority populations as a negative aspect of their immigration process. These participants talked about preference to try to communicate in English with “American people” rather than with Latinos, since Latinos usually “laugh at them.” One said, “I don’t speak Spanish” without her try to say something in English, and when she

did allow them, Latinos told them they could not understand her “Mexican” accent.

Discrimination against immigrant women also occurred at their work settings. Conchita said, “sometimes they don’t even try to understand what you are trying to say...have some empathy for what we are going through as immigrant...I believe they feel we come to take/stole their place...jobs...but we don’t...!” (“A veces ellos ni el esfuerzo hacen por entender lo que uno quiere decir...no tienen empatia por lo que nosotros como imigrantes pasamos...yo pienso que ellos sienten que venimos a robarles el lugar, el trabajo...pero no es así...!”)

### Immigration Status and Fear

All participants talked about the burden of not having legal documents and the daily fear experiences that change how they feel about themselves. Ruth gave a good example of what her life and other’s lives are like:

...there are many changes... for people like ourselves (meaning without documents) fear change/shape us. People who don’t have documents...are some of the best workers...drivers...because we would like to be invisible...so the police don’t have any reason to stop us... it is the fear to go somewhere and what if someone tries to humiliate me...then you don’t go out... Ayyy! (with tearful aspect) It gives me a lot of sentiment/emotion, before I used to think it was rage, but now I know it’s not...it’s sadness! I have seen how “my people” are humiliated at the store...when cashing a check with a Mexican I.D. some people laughs at them... the Mexican women was very ashamed... that gives me a lot of sentiment because a person’s self-worth is not based on a legal or illegal status!

...hay muchos cambios...para la gente como nosotros (sin documentos) el miedo nos cambia. La gente sin papeles son los mejores trabajadores, conductores...porque nos gustaría ser invisibles...para que la policía no tenga ningún motivo para pararnos...entonces yo pienso que es ese miedo de ir a la tienda y que si alguien trate de humillarme...ya no va uno...no sales...Ayyy! (con lagrimas en sus ojos) A mi me da mucho sentimiento, antes pensaba que era coraje, pero ahora se que no...Es tristeza! Yo he visto como “mi gente” son humillados en la tienda...cuando cambian su cheque con un identificación Mexicana, algunas personas se burlan de ellos... la mujer Mexicana estaba muy

avergonzada...eso me da mucho sentimiento porque una persona no vale por tener un status legal o ilegal!

Similar to most participants, Ruth experienced mixed emotions, mostly sadness because, who they are is not mirrored by the new environment and laws. The many humiliations and oppressions seem to be internalized and change how they feel about themselves. Ruth also identified the common theme of wanting and feeling “invisible.” This was also mentioned by Mariposa, Conchita, and Amor. Particularly, during times of stress Amor spoke of feeling like “a zero to the left” (“a veces me siento como un cero a la izquierda”). Mariposa migrated when she was 21 years old. She wanted to learn the language and finish high school, since she had to drop out of high school in Mexico because of her need to support her parents financially; therefore, when she arrived to the U.S. she decided to lie about her age and go to high school. From being outspoken and a leader in her school in Mexico, Mariposa recalled crying and feeling like a “ghost” during her high school experience. She did not belong to the age group. Also not knowing the language, being unable to participate in class and being bullied by some students when she tried to speak English became too much pressure for Mariposa, and she decided to drop out again. Although, she had overcome this “traumatic experience” and was finishing her GED, she commented on her desire to be invisible, so as to not fear being targeted. Mariposa commented throughout her interview about the constant fear she had experienced since crossing the border. She came legally, yet she feared immigration, the police, and the possible abuse.

I remember in my way to Denver, I was very nervous...I had my visa...and permit...but ahhy! “What if immigration gets me!”...I was afraid...after we arrived here...I was also afraid to leave my home and then after my permit expired...the fear intensified. In Mexico, I never felt that something was wrong

with me, it was my country, my language, you had freedom to come and go as you pleased...now I think of my daughter, I have nightmares of what happened in Greely with the raid "redada" and what if immigration comes and takes me what would happen to my daughter-- the parents leave to work and the children keep awaiting for them...I suffer but my child does too... who would keep her if I am gone...I don't have family here...

Recuerdo que cuando venia para Denver, yo estaba muy nerviosa...traía mi visa...y mi permiso...pero ay! Que si la migra nos agarra...yo tenia miedo...después que llegamos aquí todavía tenia miedo de salir de mi casa y cuando el permiso expiro...el miedo se intensifico. En México, nunca había sentido que algo estaba mal conmigo, era mi país, mi lengua, tienes la libertad de ir y venir como se te antoja...ahora pienso en mi hija, y tengo pesadillas de lo que paso en Greely con la redada, y que si inmigracion viene, me lleva, que va pasar con mi hija...los papas se van a trabajar y los hijos ahí se quedan esperándolos...yo sufro y mi hija sufre también...quien la va cuidar/hacerse cargo si yo me voy...yo no tengo familia aquí...

### Losses and Impact to Sense of Self

In the process of immigrating to the U.S., these women experienced many losses.

One of the losses identified was the loss of familial and social support, as Mariposa spoke about how the family was essential to help one another when raising children, particularly in difficult times. Michele, who only had the support of her husband said:

...when my daughter got sick, I didn't have anyone here to ask for ...the doctors don't believe in home remedies...I felt desperate when my baby was born, I did not know how to care the umbilical cord...I would call my mom in Mexico to ask...In Mexico when a woman gives birth, the mother, the mother in Law, the neighbor...helps her...and I was here with no support, never having been a mother...it was hard!

...cuando mi hija se enfermaba, yo no tenia a nadie a quien preguntarle por un consejo...los doctores aquí no creen en los remedios caseros...yo me sentía desesperada cuando mi hija nació, yo no sabia como cuidarle su ombligo...yo le llamaba a mi mama en México para preguntarle...En México cuando una mujer da a luz, la mama, la suegra, la vecina...le ayudan...y yo aquí no tenia ningún apoyo, nunca había sido madre...fue difícil!

This was a difficult change for Michele, especially not having the advice and moral and emotional support of other women as she transitioned into the new identity



role of being a mother. In the case of Michele, important relationships would provide her with emotional, informational, and physical support that facilitated her adaptation to the immigration process. Another significant loss was the loss of sense of belonging. The sense of belonging was closely associated by the participants to the sense of who they were with, but also who they were was closely linked to the physical environment and lifestyle they had in Mexico. Therefore, the physical space and lifestyle was another loss that occurred in the process of immigrating, which impacted their sense of self. The effect of these losses seems to be felt mostly at the beginning of their arrival, but it was dependent on every individual, for some women it took months, yet for others years.

Raquel said:

It's like start all over again...you arrive and don't feel situated, centered...you feel you are in a place that it's not your country...I know this is not my home... I don't feel at home...

Si es como volver a empezar... llegas y como que no te ubicas, como que no estas bien centrada...sientes que estas en un lugar que no es mi país...se que no es mi casa...no me siento en casa...

After two years, Conchita, recalled her experience when she just had immigrated from Mexico. She talked about it in a comical tone, which probably in her early arrival did not feel funny at all:

...I felt strange about myself, as if something was wrong with me because...if I wanted to go out to walk, play with the kids...just like I used to do in Mexico... I felt people would think "look at this new comer"...because nobody here goes out of their house...only in their cars...I felt strange as if people were looking at me like a beetle ... "now what is she pretending to do?"...

...Yo me sentía extraña, como si algo estuviera mal conmigo... porque si quería salir a caminar, jugar con los niños...como lo hacia en México...yo sentía que iban a decir "esta recién llegada" ...porque aquí nadie sale...solo en carro...me sentía extraña como si todos me miraran como un bichito... "y esta que va hacer ahora"...

Along with those losses, Conchita mentioned the loss of freedom, which could be related to the different lifestyle and also to not being a U.S. citizen. The different ways that an individual use freedom reflects who she/he is- personality and identity. Mariposa said: “In Mexico, I didn’t feel anything was wrong with me or with what I was doing, it was my country, my language, I would come and go as I pleased” (“en México, yo no sentia como si algo estaba mal conmigo o con lo que estaba hacienda, estaba en mi pais, era mi idioma, podia ir y venirme como se me antojaba”).

Indeed, the ability to communicate reflects a major component of someone’s total identity. All women talked about not knowing English and the struggles in learning as an obstacle to be able to attain their goals and feel comfortable with themselves. For Mariposa, her decision to drop out of high school was influenced by her inability to communicate in English and be able to function in her role of student at the same level that other native speakers functioned. Triunfadora commented:

It was very difficult for me when I arrived and not knowing the language...I enjoy taking risks, I would try to explain myself...but it was difficult because people would laugh and they would not understand...What? What! Every time they said WHAT? It felt like they were slapping me on the face.

Fue muy difícil cuando recién llegue por no saber el idioma...Soy muy aventada, trataba de explicarme...pero era difícil porque la gente se reía de mi y no me entendía...What? What! Eran como cachetadas y cachetadas.

Michele said:

It was hard not been able to communicate...because I wouldn’t go out, if my husband wasn’t coming with me, now I understand a little more because I practice at work...I am shy to speak mainly because I believe other people will laugh at my pronunciation...

Fue muy difícil el no poder comunicarme...porque yo no sabía si mi esposo no iba conmigo, ahora ya entiendo un poquito porque lo practico en mi trabajo...me da vergüenza hablarlo porque pienso que la gente se va reír de como lo pronuncio...

For Conchita, she felt disadvantaged because she was not able to compete for jobs, and defend herself as she used to do in Mexico. She needed to depend on her husband to advocate for her when treated unfairly. She said: "I have changed a lot, I have become more inhibited...there I was like the soul...here I have become like a shadow (Invisibility), but that is changing because I can communicate better in English" ("He cambiado mucho, me he hecho mas seria...alla era como el alma...aqui me he convertido en la sombra, pero eso esta cambiando porque ya me puedo comunicar mejor en Ingles"). The inability to communicate in English was also a factor that increased the fear of going out and exposing more components of who they are or their legal status. As Ruth said, "My fear is going to go to the store and not knowing whether the cashier speaks Spanish..." ("es el miedo de ir a la tienda y que si no sabe Español...") Yet all the participants, with limited education and not having much exposure to the English language before, knew some or were somewhat fluent in English. All of them were also taking classes to perfect it. Ruth recalled with pride her persistence in learning and making herself understand at work and taking an English/Spanish dictionary, which she called her best friend, wherever she went.

In the immigration process to a new country, women have difficulty transferring/using the previous roles held in their native country. Mariposa, Amor, Esperanza, Conchita, Maria, and Michele spoke of not being able to do the jobs they did in Mexico and consequently experienced a loss of identity. For example, Maria was a fashion designer in Mexico and here, she was working cleaning offices. Amor used to be

a student, yet after coming here she worked in a kitchen, washing dishes. Moving from a community of familiar friends and family to a country of strangers with different values and philosophies also meant losing persons who up to that point had reinforced the woman's identity. Interestingly, both Esperanza and Michele talked about their experience of maintaining a whole sense of self through their personal relationships. They used a similar analogy to explain experiencing a fragmented sense of self after immigration. Michele said:

...imagine yourself- your heart...split in two...half is here with you and the other half is in Mexico...the root...you need the root to survive... that's the most important element of who one is!

...imaginate tu Corazón...partido en dos partes...la mitad esta aquí conmigo y la otra esta en México...la raíz...tu necesitas la raíz para sobrevivir... es la parte mas importante de quien es uno!

In a similar melancholic tone, Esperanza said:

...daily I live here with my heart split in half because I want to live here but want to go back because of my family, the memories...

...todos los días vivo aquí con el Corazón partido a la mitad porque quiero vivir aquí pero quiero regresar por la familia, las memorias...

This experience of "identity fragmentation" seems to persist as their children grow and adapt to the culture and life of the U.S. The mothers do not want their children to go through the same migratory experience they went through.

For Ruth, her role of being a helper and the main support for her family did not transition with her. As a result, she talked about experiencing a partial loss of identity.

Ruth's story also speaks of her sense of self was dependent on her personal relationships:

All the family reunions were at my home... I was capable because they made me feel like I was, I was the pillar at my home because they made me feel that I could

help them...my nephews and nieces will seek refuge with me... if there was someone they could trust...the person was their aunty Ruth...if someone needed money...I would say lets do this! Then when I come here...none of that exists...it was hard...it was traumatic for me...very!

Todas las reuniones eran en mi casa... yo era muy útil porque así me hacían sentir, yo era el pilar de mi casa porque siempre me hicieron sentir que yo les podía ayudar a ellos...mis sobrinos se refugiaban conmigo... si en alguien podían confiar era con su tía Ruth...si alguien necesitaba dinero...vamos a hacer tal cosa! Entonces cuando yo me vengo...no existe eso...fue difícil, traumante para mi...mucho!

I asked Ruth, “Besides losing your family and your house, was there more that was lost after your immigration process?” Ruth replied:

...(focused on her thoughts) I think so...I don't know what words to use but...uh...there I was...everybody would run to be with me...I didn't have time there, to be weak, to get sick because I was always busy giving advice and helping my sisters...I was the one who would straighten out the problems...I was strong...perhaps superficially...in order to give them the emotional comfort they needed ...but when I immigrated to the U.S. I found myself fearful, scared...I had never felt afraid... I was unable to do anything...I felt weak... never in my life had I felt that terrible...I had lost what I thought I was...everything!...I lost even the meaning to live...

...(centrada en sus pensamientos) Yo creo que si...no se que palabra pueda utilizar pero...yo allá era...todos corrían para conmigo...yo no tuve tiempo de ser tan débil, de enfermarme porque siempre estaba ocupada en darle consejos a mis hermanas...la que arreglaba los asuntos...era fuerte hasta...quizá por encima... para darles el confort que necesitaban...pero cuando me vine para acá me encontré con que estaba asustada...y yo nunca había tenido miedo...me encontré con que no podía hacer nada...me sentía débil...nunca en mi vida me había sentido tan mal...perdí lo que yo pensaba que era...todo!...perdí en parte hasta la razón de ser...

Ruth's story shows a phase in the immigration process when the many changes and losses confront the immigrant woman, often creating emotional distress. Ruth called her doctor in Mexico and he explained she was having an emotional dysfunction, which the doctor said caused a hormonal problem. There were other physical illnesses that

followed as a result of the depression. Ruth believed the other physical illnesses were communicating the emotional pain and the lack of outlets. She had to understand and talk about her experience. All twelve participants associated their early living situation, usually shared household, the new culture, and the many losses with physical and emotional illness.

Similar to Ruth, all the other eleven women went through some sort of depression episode-- mimicking grief. For some of them, there was inhibited grief. Raquel's immigration was influenced mostly by her husband, and of all participants she was the one with less support. Her parents and sibling lived in Mexico and she reported her husband had died three years ago. At the beginning of the interview, Raquel was very ambivalent and fearful about the purpose of the project, signing the consent form, and trusting this researcher with such private information, even so she decided to continue. Throughout the interview, Raquel looked out a window and fidgeted with a piece of paper. She appeared anxious, showing her deep sadness about many losses not yet grieved. Raquel said: "I told my husband ...what is behind me...my past...it's no longer important. I only care about my three children...I don't cry...I didn't cry when my husband died...I try to live my life normally and not think about my past...or my birthplace" ("yo le dije a mi esposo...lo que esta atras, se queda atras...es mi pasado...y ya no me importa mas. Solo me importa mis tres hijos...yo no lloro...no llore cuando mi esposo murió...yo trato de vivir mi vida normal y no pensar en el pasado...o en mi país natal").

### Factors that Facilitate Immigration Transition

All participants mentioned one or more factors that had or would have helped facilitate their immigration process. They identify many factors that can help facilitate the immigration transition for other immigrants going through a similar experience. Some of them used their own experience to give advice to their families living still in Mexico. Participants recognized that one of the main factors that created difficulties in their immigration experience was the lack of legal documentation. Based on this factor, there were many other implications, like risking their life across the Mexican- U.S. border that affected their sense of self and transition to adapt to the new culture. Ruth said:

If only they had not denied my visa those two times- because they didn't had a reason to deny it... it would be easy for me, because I wouldn't have stayed here. I only wanted to come and see my husband and mother and go back...

Si no me hubieran negado la visa esas dos veces- porque no había razón...hubiera sido fácil para mi, porque no me hubiera quedado aquí, yo nadamas quería venirme a ver a mi esposo, mi mama y regresarme...

Michele also emphasized the need to have a legal permit to enter the country, but a document that would allow them to stay and work legally. This, she believes would be the best way to help immigrant women have an easier transition and less damage to their sense of self:

The main thing is to come legally...that way one doesn't feel like a criminal. Also the person would be able to work and move around freely, have more access to affordable medical assistance...that would have really helped me. I recommend other women to stay in their home...their country...unless they have their residency.

Lo mas importante es venirse legalmente...de esa manera uno no se siente como criminal. También la persona puede trabajar y moverse libremente, tener más

acceso a servicios médicos a costo razonable...eso me hubiera ayudado a mí. Yo les recomiendo a otras mujeres que se estuvieran allá en su casa...en su país... a menos que ellas tengan su residencia.

Five women also recommend other women to stay in Mexico. Amor gave a valuable recommendation to other women based on her own experience:

It is better to struggle in one's own country...having lived a traumatic experience across the desert of the Mexican – U.S. border...and...risking my life and my child's...I would have stayed there... please try to obtain your passport...don't risk your life...it's a terrible sensation...if they are here I would recommend for them to study English as soon as they arrive or before coming here...get your GED...that would be something that would have helped and I would have done it if someone had recommended...

Es mejor que batallen allá, en el país de ellas...haber vivido una experiencia tan traumática como es el cruzar el desierto por la frontera México- E.U.A...y arriesgar mi vida y la de mi hijo...mejor me hubiera quedado allá...por favor traten de sacar su pasaporte...no arriesguen su vida...es una sensación terrible...si ya están aquí pues yo les recomendaría que estudien inglés tan pronto como lleguen o antes de venirse...consigan su GED...esas son cosas que a mi me hubieran ayudado y hubiera hecho si alguien me lo hubiera recomendado...

Ruth recommendation for other women and her family was:

I call my siblings in Mexico and I told them to study, to go to college...my nieces and nephews are attending bilingual schools, they are trying to better themselves...I told my sister... “Our country is not so bad, but we don't have people with higher education.” I think for those of us that are now here...we have...I have a commitment to help my children and family succeed educationally...so they don't have to immigrate and go through the same suffering I went through and still at times go through...because they think that we are doing well!! That we earn dollars...and no! It's not that easy. They need to know about what we go through...I helped my 10 year old niece so she can buy her books and whatever else she needs because she is an excellent student and she wants to go to college...she says “aunty when I grow up I will go to visit you, but only to visit and I am coming back”...that fills me with pride, because she will be able to find a good job in her own country and compete at the same level that anyone here.

Yo les llamo a mis hermanos en México y les digo que estudien, vayan a la Universidad...mis sobrinos van a escuelas bilingües, ellos están tratando de



superarse...yo le dije a mi hermana... “nuestro país no esta tan mal, pero no hay gente preparada.” Yo pienso que para aquellas de nosotros que ya estamos aquí, pues tenemos un compromiso de ayudar a nuestros hijos y familiares a que triunfen... para que no tengan que immigrar y pasar por el sufrimiento que yo pase y todavía a veces estoy...porque ellos piensan que estamos bien!! Que aquí ganamos dólares...y no! No es tan fácil. Ellos necesitan saber por lo que estamos pasando... yo le ayudo a mi sobrina de 10 años para que se compre libros y lo que necesita porque es una estudiante excelente y desea ir a la universidad... ella me dice “tía cuando crezca yo voy a ir a visitarte, pero solo a visitar y me regreso”...eso me llena de orgullo porque ella va encontrar un buen trabajo en su país y competir al mismo nivel que alguien de aquí.

The twelve participants commented on the importance of knowing, even the basics of the English language, either before their immigration or as soon as they arrived to Denver. Triunfadora with strength in her voice said:

I would recommend other women to learn English, because you are nobody if you don't know the English language...I felt like a potato ...if you want to do something, become what you want....you need to learn English.

Yo les recomendaría a otras mujeres que aprendieran Ingles, porque no eres nadie si no sabes Ingles...yo me sentia como una papa...si quieres hacer algo...llegar a ser lo que tu quieres...necesitas aprender el idioma.

Ruth emphasized that learning English will serve immigrant well in the U.S. and the world. Ruth made a point about the “fantasies” that people in Mexico have about the United States, which motivates them to immigrate to the U.S. Soñadora, particularly talked about the need to be more realistic and the effort that women need to make in order to enjoy the good opportunities that this country offers to everyone who is willing:

I think many times we, immigrants come looking for the “American Dream”...umm.yea...that's a dream! People...women...need to know that it is difficult ... sometimes you have to forget – put aside many things you love...I know you feel “nostalgia”...it is normal to feel sad, because you are in a land that is not your home...you are learning about a new country, new environment, new language, and a culture almost totally different than your own... But that's good, exciting! Women need to remind themselves WHY THEY ARE HERE! They

came to succeed! In this country you don't have to conform ...you have many opportunities...Read, learn about resources in the community, meet people from different cultures, learn -not just English...maybe Greek...computers (laugh) I tried it! But you have to acknowledge and move on out of feeling sad, sorrow all day...be strong! And make your best effort!

Yo pienso que muchas veces nosotros, inmigrantes venimos buscando el “sueño Americano”...ummm...si...es un sueño! La gente...mujeres...necesitan saber que es difícil...que se tienen que olvidar- poner a un lado muchas cosas que se aman...yo se que sienten nostalgia...es normal el sentirse triste, porque estas en una tierra que no es tu casa... estas aprendiendo de otro país, ambiente, lengua, y una cultura casi totalmente diferente a la tuya...Pero eso es bueno, emocionante! Las mujeres necesitan acordarse DEL PORQUE ESTAN AQUI! Ellas vinieron para triunfar! En este país no se tienen que conformar...tienes muchas oportunidades...leer, aprender de recursos en la comunidad, conocer gente de otras culturas, aprender no solo Ingles...quizá Griego...computadoras (se ríe) Yo lo intente! Pero se tiene que reconocer esto y después moverse de el estarse sintiendo triste, todo el día...sean fuertes! Y hagan su mejor esfuerzo!

With the same excitement and boldness, Mariposa, Raquel, Triunfadora, Michele, and Esperanza also recommended women to remind themselves about the reasons that motivated them to immigrate. They also reminded themselves to not lose sight of them and to know that it is part of the immigration process to feel sadness, yet there are great opportunities in the U.S. for those who try their best effort. In a jovial tone Esperanza said:

I would tell other Mexican women: to grow, break all those fears, learn English, to learn how to drive, ...because I believe we all have opportunities in this country, even without legal documents...everyone can achieve their goals...but need to learn to leave your children with someone to help...you need to let go of things you want in order to provide for them a better future.

Yo le diría a otras mujeres Mexicanas: crezcan, aprendan a vencer los miedos, aprendan Ingles, aprendan a manejar,...porque yo creo que todos tenemos oportunidades en este país, a pesar de no tener documentos...todos pueden alcanzar sus metas...pero necesitan aprender a dejar a sus hijos al cuidado de alguien mas...a veces tenemos que desprendernos de las cosas que queremos para brindarles un futuro mejor.

Esperanza noted that in her immigration experience, she had to let go of important aspects of her identity in order to achieve her goals, like being a stay home mother. They all were acknowledging that change was difficult and part of the immigration experience, but it was essential to grow.

There were three elements that all participants identified as important to facilitate the process of their immigration transition: having a stable place to live, having a job, and having support/guidance. Lastly, at this point during the interview they had analyzed most of their immigration experience and the many challenges they had already overcome, therefore, the majority recognized and talked with freedom about the courage, strength, and many assets they possess. It is a major element that they wanted other immigrant women to value. Most of them felt it was a shared quality of Mexican women: to discover through that immigration journey. Libertad said, “I would recommend Mexican women to have faith and confidence in themselves- if you have the strength...love, faith, and confidence will move you ahead. But mostly...maintain the love toward God, yourself, and life!” (“yo les recomiendo a las mujeres Mexicanas que tengan fe y confianza en ellas mismas—ellas tienen la fortaleza...y el amor, fe, y confianza las sacara adelante. Pero antes que nada...deben de mantener el amor para Dios, ellas mismas, y la vida!”)

#### What is Remembered and Missed from Mexico

All participants reported missing more than one aspect about Mexico. This was the question where the participants had more similar responses. When I asked participants what they recalled and what they missed about Mexico, for most with a “suspiro” big breath would say “todo,” meaning “everything.” Then they would go into specifics and

the first aspect missed by all of them was the family. Ruth said: “I would be lying if I did not say I miss my siblings- my family, I don’t say anymore that I am lonely like the dog (popular saying) but I can do without everything else, except my family...nothing can fill the void or replace them.” Libertad who had 17 years without going back to visit Mexico said:

I miss just been in Mexico, seeing my native country, feeling that I am there...because even the air feels different...I don’t know how to explain it (struggling to find words for her feelings)...ahh...but there is “an air” in Mexico different from here...and I feel it’s part of me...like a deep peaceful, fresh breath, something that doesn’t translate with you as you immigrate!

Extraño el sentir, ver mi tierra, sentir que estoy allá...porque hasta el aire se siente diferente...no se como explicarlo, pero hay un aire diferente al de aquí...y siento que es parte de mi...como un respire profundo, fresco, con paz, algo que no se traslada con uno al imigrar!

Five of the participants, who overall had different degrees of fluency in English, commented that they missed the freedom to communicate and speaking Spanish. Other popular responses among the women were the food (ten responses), the Mexican lifestyle (eleven responses), and unity of the community (ten responses). The participants associated these elements to their identity; therefore, when they immigrated to the U.S. these elements missed felt like a void to their sense of self. Maria spent forty eight years of her life in Mexico and three and a half years in the U.S.:

I miss...mi country, the people...the warm weather, my friends, the food, the parties...everything! In Mexico we all are like....umm...like a family...very close...I remember at 3 p.m. it was lunch time and the family will come sit around the table, then my father would bring his guitar and we would sing, share some coffee and chat with the neighbors...ahhh! I yearn for the close relationships...during Christmas or holidays, one neighbor would cook the “tamales”, other the “burritos”, other the “posole” we would light a fire and spend the night talking, singing...everybody in the neighborhood! It was harmony and human warmth! When you come here the family tries to keep that...but it’s really difficult we have to adapt to the laws and the rapid rhythm of life...then people

change and forget the real meaning of life...In Mexico I was part of something bigger than me... now I am not! It gives me nostalgia...I am not depressed...but I miss what I left in Mexico...who I was with them!

Extraño...mi país, la gente...el clima calido, los amigos, la comida, las fiestas...todo! En México todos somos como...umm... como una familia...muy unidos...Recuerdo que a las 3 de la tarde era hora de la comida, y la familia venia, se sentaban todos alrededor de la mesa, entonces mi padre se traía la guitarra y nosotros cantábamos, compartíamos un cafecito y platicábamos con los vecinos...ahhh! yo añoro por la unidad en las relaciones...en Navidad o cualquier otro día festivo, un vecino cocinaba los tamales, otro los burritos, otro el pozole...prendíamos una fogata y pasábamos toda la noche platicando, cantando...todos en el vecindario! Eso era armonía y calidez humana! Cuando uno viene aquí intentamos preservar eso...pero es muy difícil porque nos tenemos que adaptar a las leyes y el estilo de vida tan ajetreado de este país...entonces la gente cambia y se olvida del verdadero significado de la vida...En México yo era parte de algo mas grande que yo...ahora ya no lo siento así! Eso me da nostalgia..No estoy deprimida...pero extraño lo que deje en México...quien era con ellos!

The elements mentioned, like the relationships and the food have a more profound meaning that related to how the women felt about themselves; it was explained by participants as a sacred time to share, socialize, laugh, and be part of something bigger. Throughout the interviews, the women spoke of differences between Mexico and the U.S., but several spoke about those differences within the context of what they think about and what they miss. For instance, Raquel spoke of individuality in the U.S. vs. collectivity in Mexico, of constantly being around family and friends in her native Mexico. She missed that now in Denver, where she appreciates the small gestures of eating lunch with co-workers, going to church with her children, and spending time with some friends during the weekend. Triunfadora, who misses Mexico terribly, talked about missing the cultural custom of sharing a cup of coffee or plate of food, of being welcome in your neighbors' homes, of being sociable regardless of status or age. Mariposa specifically addressed the inter-generational collective nature of activities among children

and adults. She named the popular Mexican play/games “mamaleche” and “loteria”; she noted she makes efforts to create that for her own children and friends. She also spoke of missing “a fantasy” because much of the beauty she knew as a young adult is gone, with increasing crime and government corruption. Every participant showed some affect (anger, disappointment, frustration, sadness) as they understand and talk about the social, political, and economical forces that have shaped their life in Mexico.

Along with the lifestyle, nine participants mentioned they longed for the freedom to move physically (without cars), the freedom to advocate for their needs on their own, and also to be themselves with people in relationships. Conchita commented: “I miss the freedom of Mexico, the sincerity of the friends...I have new friends here, but it’s not the same...you first introduce yourself...to someone, but always with the fear that they would find out about the legal status and I don’t really know the intentions of people...that is a huge impediment because you can’t start a sincere friendship...people with no documents are usually warding themselves...and that limits their capacity to be themselves like they were in Mexico” (“Extraño la libertad de México, la sinceridad de los amigos...tengo nuevos amigos aqui, pero no es lo mismo...porque primero te presentas con alguien, pero siempre con el miedo que van a saber de tu status legal y pues en realidad no conoces las intenciones de la gente... eso es un impedimento muy grande para poder formar una amistad sincera desde el principio...la gente que no tiene documentos comunmente se ve a la defensiva...y eso limita la capacidad de ser ellos mismos como eramos en México.” Along this line, Michele commented:

I miss how I was in Mexico, there I was more liberal, I had freedom to express myself, here it’s like a “golden jail” (popular saying), as the song says, because we have everything...materially, yet jailed because I can’t go out with the peace

and freedom I did in my home land...I feel I have a double life, personality, just as if I was two different individuals at the same time, because I can't express my feelings, defend my rights...I don't have rights! I can't be who I am...always hiding...people take a different identity...because of the lack of freedom, rights, the fear, feeling unaccepted, discriminated, then you present yourself as reserved, quite...I think most immigrants live a double life here in the U.S. because there is not a space to be ourselves...I would like to be myself and express like I used to do in Mexico!

Extraño como era en México, allá era mas liberal, tenia mas libertad para expresarme, y aquí no, es como una jaula de oro, dice la canción porque tiene todo...materialmente...pero se siente enjaulada porque no es lo mismo de salir, expresar los sentimientos, esa parte de uno...aquí siento que tengo doble vida, personalidad, como si fuera dos personas a la misma vez, porque aquí se tiene que callar todo sin defender sus derechos...no tengo derechos! No puedo mostrar quien soy...siempre escondiéndose a la defensiva...y eso resulta en un cambio en la identidad en la persona...por la falta de libertad, derechos, el miedo, sentirse rechazada, discriminada...entonces la gente te ve o te presentas como reservada, callada...yo pienso que la mayoría de los imigrantes viven con dos personalidades porque no hay espacio para ser...me gustaría ser yo misma y expresarme como lo hacia en México!

Michele, like Alba, Ruth, and Amor missed and yearn the aspect of feeling whole, as they used to feel in their native country. They missed having a place in society that provides them with visibility, citizenship, opportunities, and rights. Alba notes "I miss the happiness, the closeness of the community, the warmth of people; you leave everything there when you immigrate...the sense of feeling alive, umm...whole...!" ("extraño la felicidad, la unidad de la comunidad, la calidez de la gente; uno deja todo allá cuando emigra...el sentirse vivo...umm...completa...!").

Five participants desired to have the ability to go back to Mexico and visit their family, eventually coming back having the U.S. as their permanent home. Of those five, Raquel, Conchita, and Soñadora noted that their desire to stay in the U.S. relates to the desire for wanting their children to have more educational opportunities. Raquel said, "My children are the only reason holding me here...because I know if we go back to

Mexico, they will suffer the many changes in lifestyle, but they will also drop academically...so I have to stay” (“mis hijos son la unica razon que me detiene aqui...porque se que si regresamos para México, ellos va a sufrir los cambios de estilo de vida, pero tambien academicamente, por e so tengo que estarme aqui”). Seven of the women shared their desire to go back and live in Mexico, but would like to have the possibility to visit the U.S. to see their relatives who live here. Ruth and Triunfadora have a similar dream that is to go back and transition into their old age “...to live their last days of life in peace...happy! (“¡Regresar a México y hacerse viejita...vivir los últimos dias de su vida en paz y feliz!”).

#### Descriptions and Feelings of Self

When immigrant women were asked how they felt and describe themselves, most of them spoke enthusiastically about feeling proud about themselves and what they had accomplished. They reflected on their character, either because it was an innate quality or have become through time and challenges. Several reflected throughout the interview about their experience of being an immigrant woman in the current socio-cultural context of immigration. Given the complicated and risky immigration journeys, all the participants recognize the courage and bravery they had, and that it takes for a woman to go through what they had gone through and still maintain a positive outlook in life. In the definition of themselves these immigrant women, used descriptions that express who they are in relationship. For example, Libertad commented, “I am a woman, a mother, a friend.” Others mentioned being a wife, daughter, and also a member of a larger group, like Latino community, or religious denomination. Most of them had strong spiritual beliefs and considered this a main characteristic of who they are.



They also identified their emotional sensibility and love toward themselves and others, particularly their children. Alba noted “The love of a mother is unlimited and for them I would try to do the impossible.” Participants humbly yet proudly reflected about their strengths and limitations with which they have and will confront their fears.

Conchita noted, “I am talkative, not shy, sincere, trusting, joyful, sensible, and crier...I also fear many things...like new challenges...mainly because of my legal status” (“Soy muy platicadora, no soy tímida, sincera, alegre, sensible, y chillona...también temo de muchas cosas...como los nuevos retos...mas bien por el status legal”).

Seven of them described themselves as helpers, in different ways and levels. Certainly, most of them talked about their role/identity in helping others; their desire to help other immigrant people, help their family economically, emotionally, and morally. Triunfadora identified herself as a “humanist”, and has obtained a career in a helping profession; she also said she is a “risk taker” as shown in her life story and the vignettes above. Others, like Alba, Libertad, and Raquel also like to be risk takers or “aventadas”. Triunfadora is the participant who has lived in the U.S. the longest, 18 years, and she was one of two who said she feels “complete” at this stage in her life.

Being a helper appears to be a quality that participants struggled to use in their early arrival to the United States, yet now with more time and knowledge about the new environment most of them have managed to reintegrate and refine this quality of their identity. Ruth said, “now after three difficult years, I have once again become the same as I used to be in Mexico...I began again to give emotional comfort to my siblings, who live in Mexico...now by phone...(laughs) but now with more strength, with the conviction of what I am talking about!” (“ahora después de tres años, soy otra vez la

misma que era en México...ya empecé otra vez a darles apoyo emocional a mis hermanas que viven en México... ahora por teléfono...(riéndose) pero ahora con la fuerza y convicción de lo que estoy hablando!” Ruth recognizes that her identity has changed; the difficulties encountered during her immigration process have made her “grow emotionally...to become a stronger person...and why not...now I can say I am worth more than before” (“crecer emocionalmente...ser en una persona mas fuerte...y porque no...ahora puedo decir que valgo mas que antes”). An increase in self-esteem was noted among many participants as a result of the diverse stressors they have overcome. These were common personal definitions among all participants: determine, optimistic, strong, hard worker, persistent, sincere, intelligent, sociable, capable, and bold. Maria, the oldest of the twelve participants, gave the most adjectives and descriptions of herself. She took great pride particularly on her abilities to be romantic and creative. She said:

I am very romantic, since I was young I wrote poetry, when I immigrated...umm...perhaps because of the solitude...I began to write poetry, songs—which they have been recorded!...I like the “ranchero” music style...those are my accomplishments...I dedicated my life to my family...I was both a mother and a father...now it is my time to strive for my goals, ...sometimes time leaves scars/marks in the body, but the soul continues to be the same...young, perhaps like a child...a dreamer...with illusions to move forward...here I had that opportunity...

Yo soy muy romántica, escribía versos de joven, cuando inmigre...umm...quizá por la soledad...empecé a escribir versos, poesía, canciones, que ya están siendo grabadas!...a mi me gusta el estilo ranchero...esos son mis logros...yo me dedique mi vida a mi familia...me toco ser madre y padre...ahora es tiempo de luchar por lo que yo quiero, ... a veces los años te dejan huellas en el cuerpo, pero en el alma sigues siendo la misma, joven, niña tal vez soñadora...tienes ilusiones de salir adelante pero yo aquí he tenido oportunidad...

Maria, and other women talked about their creativity to create modes of self-expression that help facilitate their adjustment to the many changes after immigration. Ruth also noted her tendency to do “self-therapy” in times of distress but now as a hobby. Ruth commented “my hobby is to do reverse writing...as a way to relieve the stress...to vent...it is a therapy that I created for myself...I also talk to the mirror...you know!” (“mí pasatiempo es escribir alreves...para aliviar el stress...sacar todo...es una forma de terapia que invente para mí...también hablo al espejo...sabe!”). All the participants reported they had come out with some sort of outlet to relieve the emotional distress experience after their immigration to the U.S. Interestingly, all of them also had not share their immigration experience with the same detail and length as they did it in their interview with me. Ruth said, “if I had not talked with you about my life...I would not have discovered some things about myself...because I had never shared my story with anyone...now that I have talked with you...I felt...umm...like...how can I explain?...like when you get a new hair cut...I feel light...calm...you gave me the trust to open up...thank you!” (“si no hubiera compartido con usted sobre mi vida...no hubiera descubierto algunas cosas sobre mí...porque nunca le había contado mi vida a nadie...ahora que platique con usted...me siento...umm...como...como le explicare? ...como cuando se hace un corte de cabello...me siento livianita...tranquila...usted me dio la confianza para abrirme...gracias!”) The participants showed that aspect of being appreciative of what others have offered after their immigration to this country.

#### Experience with Social Workers and Other helping Professions

Participants in this study reported having minimal exposure to social workers. They would like to meet/ work with professionals, who are well-prepared and are

confident in the personal qualities of their profession. They noted that it would be important for professionals to have an interest in working with the immigrant community so they are more understanding and patient with them. Participants would like for them and other immigrants to be treated with dignity and respect from professionals. Michele said “They need to learn to listen, to be patient when we try to communicate, but also be more careful of what they say and how they say it” (“necesitan aprender a escuchar, ser pacientes cuando intentamos comunicarnos, pero tambien mas cuidadosos de lo que dicen y como lo dicen”). Along with that, Esperanza, Triunfadora, and Alba noted there is a big difference in communicating in one’s own native language vs. a second language because of diverse reasons including the emotional affect, but also limited knowledge of the language; therefore, it will be beneficial if professionals are bicultural and bilingual. They would like to have the opportunity to speak in Spanish with a professional—“just to be listened, without interruptions” and have their emotions validated. Seven of them recognize that it is more difficult to open up with a friend and relative, because “family and friends usually don’t listen, assume, and want to fix—I just need to talk, get it out ...and a professional can be more objective and helpful”, Michele noted. Like Ruth, all participants reported obtaining emotional comfort and peace after their interview and would like to have a similar experience with other professionals. Ruth strongly recommends supporting and encouraging immigrants to talk about their experience and help them understand what is happening, in order to prevent emotional disorders or physical problems. Triunfadora gave a particular recommendation about the need to recognize the role of motherhood by clinicias. She values and honors the wisdom that mothers have, and strongly recommends that immigrant mothers are referred to

professionals who are parents, specifically mothers “You are a mother...you know and understand...I have worked with psychologist who aren’t parent and they don’t understand that a mother is connected from the heart...it is an extra connection...the love of a mother toward the children...doesn’t matter how awful the child appears to others!” (“porque eres madre...tu sabes y conoces... he trabajado con psicólogos que no son padres y ellos no entienden que una madre esta conectada del Corazón...el amor de una madre es un lazo extra...que no importa que tan malo sea el hijo para otros, es tu hijo y lo amas!”).

There are diverse and multiple things that these twelve immigrant Mexican women would like to inform professionals or have them further explore so they become more effective in working with other immigrant women or refugees with similar experiences. Alba believes that it is important for professionals to know that as immigrant Mexican women they have unfortunate experiences, coming across the Mexico- U.S. border, but also at their arrival. It would be beneficial for social workers to learn more about the conditions and ways in which immigrants come legally and illegally. Participants’ stories and experiences are unique. Conchita and Mariposa advise professionals to avoid generalizing and assuming that all immigrants entered the country illegally.

Because of the undocumented legal status, there are many fears experienced, but also limitations of their freedom and rights. Conchita specifically spoke of the importance for social workers and other professionals to be knowledgeable of the migratory stages and the emotional problems faced. She noted, “When one just arrive, feels inferior, with low moral, lack of motivation...we yearn for what is in

Mexico...there are many changes in our lives... we don't feel we have the coping skills and support we had in Mexico to protect ourselves ... and when someone makes racial remarks...everything seems to hurt more when you are not in your homeland..."

("cuando uno recién llega, se siente inferior, con la moral baja, le falta motivación...extrañamos y deseamos lo que dejamos en México...hay muchos cambios en nuestras vidas...no sentimos que tenemos la habilidades y apoyo que teníamos en México para protegernos...y cuando alguien dice algo racista...como que duele mas porque no estas en tu tierra..."). Esperanza's recommendation supports this, as she acknowledged the need for immigrants, who recently arrived, to know there are many losses and consequently a mixture of emotions that come together, which can shake their sense of self and their purpose in immigrating. It would be helpful to give immigrant women this information to normalize their experience and help them understand and grieve the losses, as they adapt and grow. Also, give them information about resources in the community.

Libertad added to that recommendation, asking social workers to be more aware of not only the emotional, mental, physical, and/or economical problems related to immigrating, but there are other aspects that make their immigration transition and adaptation more challenging, like domestic violence or disabilities. She also pointed out the importance of learning about gender specific issues and how their Mexican woman identity is challenged and transformed. Raquel, Triunfadora, and Maria would like for professionals to be more informed of the Mexican culture, the needs, and for them to respect those cultural differences, not imposing or giving advice, but asking to learn about their uniqueness as Mexican immigrant women from others. This leads to a

recommendation of participants wanting to change judgments that have led to discrimination in the society. Mariposa said, “I want them to know that we do want to succeed, but learning a new language is difficult, please look at our strengths...we are not just victims...we have more” (“quisiera que supieran que nosotros venimos a triunfar, pero no es facil aprender el idioma, por favor vean nuestras fortalezas...no somos solo victimas...tenemos mas que ofrecer”). Along the same lines, Amor noted “we don’t come to take away jobs like people think, we are hard workers, with goals and dreams and need a fair chance like anybody else...we would like to go back, yet we want a better life for our children” (“no venimos a quitarles los trabajos como mucha gente piensa, somos gente muy trabajadora, con metas y sueños y necesitamos una oportunidad justa como cualquier otra persona...nos gustaria regresar a México pero tambien nos gustaria que nuestros hijos tuvieran una mejor vida”). Given what the women recommended, Soñadora would like professionals to explore immigrant women’s spirituality because spirituality is a great source of strength for women suffering from emotional problems. They also suggest that clinicians encourage immigrants to talk about the ways they deal with problems in their native land, then support them as they explore the new land, building again support systems, and using their strengths, one said “what worked there may also works here.” Seven of them felt strongly that immigrants needed motivation to continue and help them identify the internalized oppression as well as the strengths that they have. There are many struggles but also many benefits and success and there needs to be a balance.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research was designed and carried out to explore the experiences of Mexican immigrant women and their experience of sense of self after immigration. Specifically, the line of inquiry was guided by one main research question: Do individuals subjectively perceive their immigration experiences as shaping their sense of self? In this section, the major findings are presented and compared against other previous research and literature. The implications of the study and contributions to the field of clinical social work are also noted, which highlight some of the variables that women mentioned as a need to sustain their self-identity in the face of complicated and challenging immigration journeys.

This study confirms that Mexican immigrant women (twelve participants) perceive their immigration and resettlement experiences as changing their sense of self. In the process of immigrating different factors influence the adaptation and identity transformation of Mexican women. In his 1995 work, Akhtar talks about nine factors that determined the outcome of immigration and the effects on identity, which are examined here in relation to the current study. These factors are worth analyzing in the context of the experience of Mexican immigrant women in order to understand their immigration experience and how it shapes their sense of self. Akhtar's (1995) first factor is whether the immigration is temporary or permanent. To this regard, Falicov (1998) notes that many Latin American immigrants do not intend to stay permanently in the



United States; rather, they plan to stay a limited amount of time, often in order to gain financial stability before returning home.

This factor was reflected in the findings since the majority of participants in the study indicated a desire to return to Mexico. However, although staying was not their initial plan, because of their illegal immigration status or other meaningful circumstances, these women decided and/or felt obligated to stay: Obligated in the sense that if they left the country they won't be able to come back and visit the family members that stayed here; they won't be able to come with their (U.S. citizen) children to offer them a better education. On the other hand, they reported feeling in a "golden jail" with a fragmented sense of self. Both, Esperanza and Michele spoke of feeling their being and heart "split in half"; they want to provide to their children but want to be in Mexico, at least be able to visit their family there. Several others also talked about not feeling whole and that they would go back to Mexico (some to live permanently, others only to visit) if they had the choice to come back to the United States.

The second factor mentioned by Akhtar is the degree of choice in leaving one's country, which includes the time available for preparing for the leave. Raquel, Ruth, Mariposa, Michele, and Libertad mentioned "I will never go and live in the United States." Those respondents whose immigration was internally or self motivated had an easier transition and adaptation to this culture. On the other hand, for the women whose immigrations were externally motivated, usually by a partner, they experience more emotional, physical, and psychological dysfunction, as well as a bigger loss to their sense of self. This group also seems to have had less time and readiness to prepare to leave, therefore they experienced a more nostalgic sentiments, "If I only..." "some day...".

The findings suggest that women's experiences of nostalgia on individual and collective levels are complicated and varied. This is accurate with what Milligan (1999) and others reported. The findings also confirm that participants lack spaces to speak of their feelings, earlier selves and their homeland.

The third factor mentioned by Ahktar consists of the possibility of revisiting the home country. According to Ahktar, this is important because those who have the means to return to their country of origin appear to suffer less than those who can't or do not have the opportunity. None of the participants had the means to go back; therefore, there was a collective experience of feeling imprisoned. Participants indicated this factor highly hinders their identity continuity. Triunfadora talked about her inability to return to Mexico and the condition that led her to experiencing her past and present life as two different "senses of self." Indeed, the immigrant's inability to go back appears to increase the use of certain ego defenses, like idealizing, splitting, and devaluating. Marlin (1994) explains, "because a return is not possible, reality cannot be checked against one's fantasy and a temptation result in holding on to just one part of one's experience. The internal splitting that results does not provide a basis for successful adaptation" (p. 13). In addition, the many stressors also affect the immigrant's objectivity about their experience.

This study found that the legal status is a major stressor that impacts the outcome of immigration experience and effects on the participants' identity. For an immigrant with undocumented immigration status, returning to Mexico is often not possible or desired, and their situation and experience is similar to refugee individuals. The connections to their native culture are maintained only internally (memories, nostalgic

sentiments, etc.) or with a few people, sometimes within the ethnic group. Marlin (1994) states that “psychologically this painful situation is like balancing on a tightrope; the past and the present are like two dangerous spaces that are not connected, and both feel unsafe” (p.13). All participants talked about experiencing fear and uncertainty related to their past, present and future life. Triunfadora talked about her fear of going back to Mexico after almost 20 years of living in the U.S. and having an encounter with her past life; on the other hand, she suffers for the hardships of been treated “like a criminal” and seeing her children experience the same treatment and limitations. Mariposa with great concern in her voice talked about the current national immigration laws, raids, and anti-immigrant sentiment, which make her and her family feel unstable and unsafe. She recognizes that she lives in an “unwelcoming territory” and fears that at any moment she could be deported to Mexico, and her U.S. citizen child would suffer. Participants’ stories show enormous stress about the sociopolitical factors and their lack of control over their present life; therefore, having a daunting effect on the way they feel about themselves. The findings from the study suggest that mental health professionals who work with Mexican immigrant women clients should explore whether the current immigration events affects their patients in any way, especially if they have little social support.

In addition, related to the possibility of going back, Espin (1987, p. 499) talks about the need of the immigrant to return to her native land in order to know what their loss entail; however, the findings in this study suggest that returning to Mexico could also give immigrants the opportunity to recognize the positive outcomes and growth achieved after their immigration to the U.S. All participants indicated they have achieved a higher

level of maturity; they have strengthened their identity and learned new abilities. They also wonder if these personal achievements would translate with them if they need to go back to Mexico. Many of them reported achieving some degree of biculturalism, which is a term used by Gomez (1990) to explain the process of integrating important components of the dominant culture (like language and values) at the same time that they maintain their own roots (p. 376).

Other changes in sense of self as a result of immigration were consistent with Ward and Styles' findings. Participants identified positive changes in their sense of self on terms of feeling more confident, independent, and stronger. In addition, Espin's personal experience as an immigrant parallels with this study participants' experience. Participants in this study noted that their experiences of immigration and/or "uprootness" encompass growth that they might have not attained had they stayed in Mexico. Soñadora talked particularly of the opportunities she had to learn new things and meet new role models, who are her inspiration to continue working on her goals.

According to Ahktar, the fourth factor in determining the effects of immigration on identity is age at which immigration occurs. Most of the respondents were in their 18's and 20's at the time of immigration and two were in their late 30's and 40's. Fifth, the reasons for leaving one's country also play a role in determining success or failure in adapting to the new environment. Most participants decided to focus their reasons for immigration on the positive outcomes they wanted to obtain after immigrating, rather than the negative circumstances that push them to come. The participants mentioned four primary reasons for immigrating including joining other family members, searching for new opportunities, seeking refugee and protection, and seeking economical and

educational opportunities. This information was consistent with what other researchers, as- Del Castillo (2002) and Alvarez (1999) have mentioned in their literature. Yet, this study further indicated that these same reasons for immigrating are closely linked to their need to maintain or obtain a desire sense of self. Alba, Triunfadora, Michele, Amor, and Esperanza specifically talked about not wanting to be part of the stigmatized single mother groups in Mexico and wanting to preserve who they were in relationship. Because of those reasons, the United States was experienced by the study participants to be a more stable and secure platform from which to rebuild a new life.

Akhtar also talks about the extent to which an individual has achieved the intrapsychic capacity for separateness prior to immigration. Although, all participants were over the legal age of 18 (in Mexico), and reported having adult roles and a capacity to separate, they missed or suffered distress due to the cultural aspect of family and community unity that is highly valued among Mexican women and defines who they are. This tie was broken at the time of immigration, and after several years of living in the U.S. Participants still long for the collectiveness and who they were in that larger group in their native country. One example of this is Michele, who talked about her difficulties in adapting to the new land primarily because she had never been away from her family, particularly her mother. She had the capacity to separate from the family, yet this conflicted with her values and emotions, creating dissonance in her life.

Akhtar further talks about the way the host culture receives the immigrant; this also play a role in the latter's adaptation and associated identity change. Overall, participants had a positive experience about the way they had been received by the U.S. culture. Even though they were experiencing many stressors and limitations, they hold a

positive outlook in life and continue to believe that there is opportunity for people to achieve their goals in this country. They noted that their experienced discrimination and racism incidents felt like a greater threat to their identity than if the same incident had happened in Mexico mostly because the limited rights, resources, and support they receive in this country. Yet, in some cases this experience made them reflect upon their own internalized racism and oppression, creating a positive change on their sense of self and attitudes.

Another important variable highlighted in Akhtar's work, which impacts the immigrant's identity is the magnitude of cultural differences between the adopted and the home country. The participants did not report disliking the differences; rather, this is something they believe is good because it provides them with the security and growth they were searching for. Finally, the extent to which one's original role (especially one's vocation) can be resumed upon immigration, maintaining one's professional identity assures an "inner continuity in change" (p. 1055-1056). All participants seemed to have been challenged in this aspect of their lives. For some like Maria, they could not work as a fashion designer because of not knowing the language and not having legal documentation. For others, their role of being a "stay at home" was challenged as they needed to work to contribute to the finances. Participants reported positive changes in their identity after that happened.

Different writers and researchers have attempted to describe the transformation of sense of self when individuals who immigrate. Akhtar (1995) and Garza-Guerrero (1973) linked the stages of immigration adjustment to the process of mourning because of the many losses that the immigrants experience. Participants in this study talked about

the many losses incurred during their immigration, the feelings of grief, mourn, and nostalgia experienced and the impact on their sense of self. However, most of them talked about it as a period in time which has passed and their sense of self has evolved and strengthened. The nostalgia and melancholia is still experienced especially during special times like holidays, anniversaries, and joyful as well as stressful times.

Consistent with the models of migratory adaptation that generally include three phases, participants in this study presented an early encounter phase of disorganization and instability where the themes of loss and grief are significant, a middle phase of reorganization and adaptation, and a final phase in which a new stability is achieved. Time is an element in any phase and it proved to be a major factor that hindered or facilitated identity continuity for Mexican immigrant women. The findings show that consolidation of the self occurred over varying lengths of time for different people, also depending on their resources and social support. Raquel, Soñadora, Triunfadora, Libertad, Mariposa, Amor, and Esperanza, have lived in the United States for more than ten years, and they showed greater stability (at different levels), higher self-esteem, and comfort with the new aspects of their identity. This statement does not indicate that they have regained aspects of their sense of self that were lost after immigrating. In fact, they still yearn and recall some aspects of who they were in their native land that have not been and can not be recuperated or replaced. Yet they have integrated new elements that facilitated their adaptation in this country.

The rest of the participants who have lived less than ten years in this country appeared to be in the early to initial middle phase. They experience more disorganization, emotional, physical distress and grief towards the early sense of self.

When the participants were asked about what they missed, they talked about aspects that they experienced as a loss, but also related in some way or another to their former identity. For example, Ruth talked about missing her siblings and later recognized that she missed how the family reinforced who she was, the helper. This is aligned with the theory of relational-cultural theory that states that identity is formed in relationship. For Ruth, after her immigration, there was a loss of the familial context which resulted on a loss of sense of self but this was not easily recognized among the other losses, since it was internal and not external.

Freud (1917) talked about the difference of mourning external vs. internal losses. He noted that mourning external losses perceives them and it's the world that becomes poor and empty. Yet internal identity losses are at times difficult to recognize and it's the ego itself that becomes poor and empty. This was observed in relation to Ruth's interview. As she talked about what she missed after immigration, she focused on the significant external losses like her house and family. I asked if there was something more, and with an enlightened expression on her face she recognized and understood for the first time where her melancholic emotions were rooted. She said: "... (focused on her thoughts) I think so...I don't know what words to use but...uh...there... I was...everybody will run to be with me...had lost what I thought I was...everything!..." She was having a hard time putting into words her internal experience of loss of sense of self. This is important for social workers to be aware and knowledgeable about when working with immigrants because the client may not be aware of the internal lost experienced. Furthermore, through the formation of strong relationships, social workers can help the immigrants work through the mourning process, and facilitate the



reorganization and consolidation of their sense of identity, as someone who remains herself despite changes and restructuring.

Gehrie (1979) states that the significance of “culture is internal, and forms part of an individual’s own self-representation” (p. 170). This is consistent with the women’s responses of missing aspects of the culture, like the holidays and family/community reunions, though missing feeling part of something “bigger”- a collective environment that defined them and is attuned and mirrors their sense of self. It will be valuable for professionals to have in mind the need to explore how what immigrants miss or the nostalgic memories/emotions presented relate to who they are; because some of the aspects yearned cannot be “replace or recuperate it” yet there can be ways to facilitate identity continuity through other methods.

The findings of this study suggest that one of the major threats to Mexican immigrant women is fear. This fear is related to many cultural and language differences, but is mostly related to their illegal status. Throughout their immigration journey, these women reported fear due to many realistic sociopolitical forces they encountered. The first reason to fear was crossing the Mexican – U.S. border. This fearful experience marked the way they felt about themselves. Ruth noted “...there are many changes... for people like ourselves (meaning without documents) fear shapes us.” The illegal status is a major problem that sets the stage for immigrant women to be victimized and discriminated against: for example, the inability to work legally, have a valid I.D., access to legal means to report violations, seek medical care, attend a college or university, and free themselves of the “criminal” stigma. Consistent with Alvarez’s findings (1999) participants recognized that labels and stereotypes (“illegal,” “criminal,”

“undocumented,” etc.) interfere with their development, freedom of expression, and actions; as a result, their personality change to adapt and/or survive. For example, Conchita spoke of the difficulties in forming genuine relationships with people because of the “undocumented immigrant” status; she and others reported becoming introvert and shy. The socioeconomic circumstances that Mexican immigrant women face, particularly at their early arrival is consistent with what Rosenthal (2002) says, that one third of Latinos live in poverty, which is over 250 percent above the national average.

In addition, the lack of English language skills is a huge composite of the stressors that Mexican immigrant women experienced during their early arrival to the United States. Mirsky (1991, as cited in Lijtmaer, 2001) states that “learning a new language involves an internalization of new object and self-representations and reactivates the internal process of separation” (2001, p. 433). The ability to communicate and advocate for their needs was an obstacle to attain their goals, but all these women have taken it as a challenge and have worked consistently to learn the language. Indeed, they recognized that the many challenges and crisis encountered. After their immigration, have resulted on becoming stronger, having higher goals, and firmer identities.

All participants showed remarkable dedication and appreciation for education. Regardless of their literacy skills or grade level, all of them were studying English and many were taking preparatory courses to obtain the G.E.D. Some of them also talked about their desire to attend college. Studies may report that undocumented immigrants have less education than other populations (Del Castillo, 2002); yet, these studies does not indicate or inform about the reasons and barriers that this population come across

when wanting to pursue an education, neither talks about the efforts and passion undocumented Mexican immigrants invest on their learning. In fact, education is a priority for most and it greatly influences immigrant's decision to immigrate or stay permanently in the U.S.

Immigrant Mexican women showed a strong desire to provide effective information to support other individuals in similar situations, but also because they would like to improve the cultural competence of clinicians and increase their own visibility. Indeed, invisibility was a theme not fully explored by other researchers yet highlighted by participants in this study. They talked about the experience of feeling like, “a ghost”, “a cero to the left”, and “a shadow”. The fact that there is not a precise number of how many people without legal documents live in the United States, speaks of the marginalization and invisibility they experience. Other participant's experience of “having a double life or two senses of selves” points out to the double bind messages the host culture is perpetrating; undocumented immigrants receive consequences whether they conform or defy. Immigrant's existence is been acknowledged by criminalizing “them” and further ignoring and invalidating their humanness and contribution to society. This double bind is rather historically known and traumatic for other immigrant groups.

All participants noted it was their first time telling their story. They reported emotional comfort and would recommend other women obtaining professional support. This is consistent with Volkan's (1999) reflection on the significance of putting into words perceived and subjectively experienced memories. This is seen to be one way to readjust one's sense of time, place, and purpose, which could prove beneficial in strengthening Mexican immigrant women's sense of self. All participants in some way

or another spoke about their need to be listened to and treated with dignity, and it will be beneficial if social workers learned more in-depth about the many different immigration experiences immigrant women encountered. Alvarez (1999) who has worked with immigrant women states,

Therapeutic impasses are prone to occur when working with persons with migration experiences if the therapist is unable to resonate to the client's sense of despair, shame, sadness, grief, losses, and violations, as previously described. I would argue that the clinician's empathy would increase the possibility of facilitating a mutually empowering relationship if she expands the focus of the problems. Issues related to class, race, sociopolitical conflicts, and culture must be part of the therapeutic discourse. Therapeutic impasses can be averted if we maintain a curious and respectful stance regarding our client's ever shifting processes related to their identifications, family loyalties, sense of culture, and feelings of exclusion and inclusion, both past and present, within their significant relationships and within their host culture (p. 14-15).

Additionally, we must not purport to understand clients because we speak their language or because they are fluent in English. Being bilingual as a clinician does not necessarily imply being culturally aware or sensitive to the person's context in which the presenting problem may be embedded. Whether we are immigrants or not, it is imperative that we become aware not only of our own acculturation, class values, and assumptions regarding others different from us, but for social workers in the field, we must be conscious of our own internalized racism.

#### Strengths and Limitations: Future Research Directions

The limitations and the findings of this study indicate the need for further research in the areas of migratory stages (particularly the initial stage), grieving practices in facilitating migratory transitions, internalized oppression due to immigration status, and cultural and personal strengths/ aspects that facilitate adaptation and connection with

former sense of self. Research on culturally competent or empowerment practices to work with Mexican immigrant women will be equally valuable. Furthermore, participants in this study used a range of cultural metaphors. It will be interesting to explore the use of metaphors for other experiences of the self.

This study relied upon a homogeneous group of participants because the sample was one of convenience and recruitment occurred through snowball sampling. A possible limitation of the study was the small sample size, which included only immigrants from Mexico. This allowed for valuable interview data yet can not be easily generalized or allow this research to draw conclusions about the experience of other immigrants or minority groups living in the U.S. Another study limitation related to geographic location. All participants lived in the larger Denver urban area and their experience could greatly differ from immigrants living in rural communities. Based on these limitations, it would be recommended that future studies broaden the sample size and the geographic locations (urban; rural; eastern, coastal, southern, etc.) to consider the impact of environment on individuals' sense of self. Also, it will be valuable for future studies to interview immigrants with diverse cultural backgrounds and/or who are in the country legally. The information can be used to compare the findings to this study's in regards to the question does the factor of illegal and legal status influence identity, sense of self. Additionally, larger-scale studies that use mixed methods may contribute to a clearer understanding of the impact of immigration on an individual's sense of self.

## Conclusion

Theorists explain that development consists of a series of crises or challenges, which could be an opportunity for potential growth. Similarly, in the process of immigrating an individual's sense of self is challenged and consequently the immigrant's sense of self evolves. While it is true that the process of immigration and resettlement is both materially and emotionally taxing, it also offered Mexican immigrant women the opportunity of re-inventing themselves in positive ways that perhaps were impossible in their native land. This is particularly so for Mexican women who left oppressive sociopolitical and cultural contexts and find ways of being in the United States. Examples include women who have been abused by family members, excluded from educational and labor possibilities, condemned to invisibility, shame, and discriminated against. Conchita and Soñadora talked about their immigration experience as an opportunity to make a fresh start and learn from their mistakes. Those who took the dangerous journey across the Mexican border to the USA did so because they were denied legal means for entry. This journey of danger and risk was based on the desire to follow their unfulfilled dreams.

The immigration offered the women emotional comfort (for those whose family was here), job stability, and financial security. The immigration also offered Mexican women new outlets for growth regardless of age and socioeconomic status, for some, even the illegal immigration status. Even though participants recognized the many barriers and victimization suffered due to their illegal status, some of them also noted it has not been an impediment for their growth and driven personalities.

Other positive changes came with the struggle to define their role as women, wives, daughter, etc. in a different more liberal/feminist culture.

Furthermore, participants had the freedom to describe their life course as they wished. Arranging the interviews so that participants' answers reveal a story with a beginning to an end seems to help participants direct their story in this way and facilitate reflections about the growth they achieved, without ignoring the challenges they experienced. The use of narratives to help a client express who she was, what that client's country and culture of origin were like, what they miss or do not miss, and what the client's hopes are for the future can help restore a sense of self-continuity.

Universally, the women spoke of important relationships with family, friends and others, often citing important anecdotes about these relationships that were a part of their life stories and who they are. Mental Health professionals' awareness of the importance of women's relationships with others should enhance their ability to provide individualized care. Knowledge of the person's important relationships aids in understanding the responsibilities and social support that the person has. The use of relational-cultural theoretical concepts, reminiscence and nostalgia may also be a useful adjunct/tool to practice by providing the immigrant woman an opportunity to recapture the joys or previous relationships that are no longer available but constitute their sense of self.

Perhaps part of the human growth process in general and that of Mexican immigrant women in particular, inevitably leads to a stage of rupture and significant losses, followed by grief and sorrow. Yet, if this last process is facilitated, immigrants can find new and significant growth. While understanding is not by itself sufficient for

change, it enables us to help our clients make connections between their immigration journeys, sense of self and even non-native responses to loss. This is a validating and enabling mechanism since it frees people from pathological frames of reference. Once this is achieved, then alternative healing contexts can be explored. As clinical social workers, we are very likely to be among the first mental health professionals that help-seeking immigrants encounter. It behooves us to be more cognizant of some of the issues that are likely to be affecting immigrants. We as clinical social workers must be sensitive to these multiple losses, help our clients to mourn their losses in culturally appropriate ways, and to find ways to regain a prior sense of self. Special attention must be paid to the loss of the native culture as a holding environment.

Depression and anxiety appear to be very common symptoms, especially during the first few years of immigration. Educating the immigrant to expect some of these things can help to increase a sense of hopefulness, optimism, and to reinforce resiliency. An immediate clinical goal might be to provide support by listening, doing some psycho-education, thereby reducing the above-mentioned symptoms, and also to help an immigrant resume more active search activities, such as looking for support groups.

Participants in the study revealed enormous strengths. Their stories are a source of insight, understanding, and inspiration for others. Yet, the invisibility experienced by Mexican immigrant women with an illegal status, the lack of services, and the violations they experience is a challenge for social workers to respond, to advocate, and do further research on the life conditions and needs of a neglected and oppressed immigrant population. Moreover, when the strengths of immigrant Mexican women go unacknowledged or remain underdeveloped because they do not have access to basic resources, society suffers the loss of their participation, resourcefulness, and creativity.



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## APPENDIX A

November 30, 2006

Dear Nidia,

The Human Subjects Review Committee has reviewed your amended documents. You have done a fine job and all is now in order. We are glad now to give final approval to your study.

*Please note the following requirements:*

**Consent Forms:** All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

**Maintaining Data:** You must retain signed consent documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

*In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:*

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

**Renewal:** You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

**Completion:** You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your project. It is a very useful study and hopefully will make available the voices and the stories of a very oppressed population. When all these nativists, like Lou Dobbs go on about “broken borders” I want to ask them all how their forbearers got here and wonder if it was so different! After all the only true Native Americans in this country are the American Indians.

Sincerely,

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.  
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Elaine Kersten, Research Advisor

APPENDIX B  
INFORMED CONSENT

October 2006

Dear Potential Research Participant:

My name is Nidia A. Ponce, and I am a graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work in Northampton, Massachusetts. I am conducting a study about Mexican immigrant women and the effects of migration on the way a person feels and thinks about herself (known as sense of self). I hope to learn more about the possible connection between migration and the impact to the person's sense of self. I will use this study to complete a master's thesis and possibly in other publications and presentations. It is important you know that I am NOT part or involved with any immigration agency or the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS), which means that all your information will be kept confidential at all time. When I say that your information is confidential, I mean that I will be the only person who will know who you are, any information that could reveal who you are will be removed from writings and tapes, also any story or quotes will be disguised at the time of writing the results.

For the purpose of this study, I am interested in interviewing Mexican women, who migrated to the United States three years ago or more, when they were 18 years old or older, who have no more than junior high education, do not have any cognitive impairment, speak either Spanish or English, and reside in this country without legal documents. The only reason for these specific requirement is because I am aware that women who for example do not have their legal documents or have no more than junior high education have a different experience than those women who are residents or citizens of the U.S., or have a high school or college diploma, which will also change their experience of migration and sense of self. For that reason, I will not be interviewing women, who currently have a legal residency status, migrated younger than 18, people with high school or above educational level, individuals who speak neither Spanish nor English, or have a cognitive impairment.

Your involvement will consist of responding to a brief questionnaire that you return to me, as well as a spoken interview about your past and present experience and thoughts on what it was like for you moving to the U.S. The interview will last 45 to 60 minutes, and will be scheduled at a time and place convenient for you. The spoken interview will be recorded with an audio tape recorder for the purpose of writing and analyzing the information.

I hope that you can participate in this study and share some of your experience as an immigrant from Mexico to the United States. There are several benefits in participating in this study but you will not be paid for your participation.

If you choose to participate, the information that you share may help to improve and expand mental health services for Mexican immigrant women.

I believe that these services can be improved and your desire to share your story could be quite helpful. Your participation can also be a great opportunity to tell your story and to reflect upon it. I hope that you will enjoy the interview and the sense that you have contributed to a field of knowledge that is important but not always recognized. Before hand I want to thank you because the information that you share will help me with my own progress as a social worker. I intend to work with immigrants, and have chosen to write my master's thesis to expand the literature on social work with Mexican immigrant women and ethnic minorities.

I understand and respect the sensitivity of this topic. As mentioned above, I will not share any information that identifies you as a participant at any point during the research, analysis or sharing of the results of this study. I will conceal information from your responses on the questionnaire and the spoken interview so that you will not be identified at any point and materials will be locked in a secured file cabinet, which only I have access to. I will be the main handler of data including transcripts; any person assisting with transcription of the interview will be required to sign a confidentiality agreement. My research advisor will have access to the materials only after all identifying information has been removed. I will keep the written information and questionnaires for three years, consistent with federal regulations. During this time, questionnaires and written information will be kept in a locked cabinet. After the three year period has expired, all material will be destroyed.

You may or may not, feel uncomfortable or distressed telling about your life and your memories about the transition of migrating to the United States. I am providing a list of referral resources in case you feel any discomfort during or after the interview. I hope that the interview will not create any feelings of discomfort, but in the case that it does, I hope that you will speak with someone who may be able to assist you.

Participation in the study is voluntary, and you may refuse to answer any question, end or withdraw from the interview during the interview, should you so wish. You have the right to withdraw from the study until April 1, 2007; your request will be honored and there will be no penalty. If you decide to withdraw from the study, all the materials pertaining to your participation will be promptly destroyed. You may reach me directly. I include my contact information below.

YOUR SIGNATURE BELOW INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION; THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION AND RIGHTS; AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

I thank you for your time, attention, and willingness to consider participation in the study.

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Nidia A. Ponce  
303-356-1826  
[nponce@email.smith.edu](mailto:nponce@email.smith.edu)

Please keep a copy of this for your records.

THANK YOU!



## APPENDIX B2

### FORMA DE CONSENTIMIENTO - PERMISO

Octubre 2006

Querida Participante:

Mi nombre es Nidia A. Ponce, soy una estudiante de maestría en trabajo social en la Universidad de Smith College School for Social Work, en Northampton, Massachusetts. Estoy realizando un estudio con mujeres Mexicanas sobre los efectos de trasladarse de su país natal a los Estados Unidos, y como eso ha afectado la manera que la persona piensa y siente sobre ella misma (esto se conoce como sentido de si misma). Espero aprender más sobre la posible relación entre el proceso de migración y el sentido de si misma. Yo voy a usar este estudio para completar mi tesis de maestría y quizás otras presentaciones. Es importante que usted sepa que yo NO soy parte o estoy involucrada con ninguna agencia de inmigración o el departamento de Servicios de Inmigración o Naturalización (INS), lo cuál quiere decir que yo seré la única persona que sepa quien es usted. Cualquier información que usted comparta conmigo que pueda revelar su identidad será borrada/removida de los escritos o los cassettes. También cualquier historia o frase personal será cambiada de manera que no se le pueda identificar.

Por el propósito de este estudio, yo estoy interesada en escuchar las historias de mujeres Mexicanas, quienes hayan emigrado a los Estados Unidos tres años atrás o más, cuando tenían 18 años o mayores, que tengan no más de primaria o secundaria que no tengan algún problema cognitivo, hablen ya sea Español o Ingles, y que vivan en este país sin documentos legales. La razón por la que se pide estos requisitos tan específicos es porque yo estoy consciente que las mujeres quienes por ejemplo no tienen sus documentos legales o no tienen una carrera universitaria tienen una experiencia diferente a aquellas mujeres que son residentes o ciudadanas de los Estados Unidos o tienen una carrera universitaria, lo cual también cambia sus experiencias de migración y sentido de si mismas. Por esta razón, yo no estoy interesada en entrevistar a mujeres que residen legalmente, quienes vinieron antes de los 18 años, personas que tienen preparatoria o universidad, personas que no hablen Español ni Ingles, o que tengan algún problema cognitivo.

Su participación consistirá en contestar un corto cuestionario, y platicar sobre sus experiencias y pensamientos del presente y del pasado en el proceso de emigración. La entrevista será aproximadamente de 45-60 minutos, y su cita será acomodada a su horario en un lugar conveniente para usted. La entrevista será grabada en un audiotape con el único propósito de escribir y analizar la información.

Espero que usted pueda participar en este estudio y compartir algunas de sus experiencias como Mexicana viviendo en los Estados Unidos. Hay algunos beneficios en participar en este estudio pero no se le pagara por su participación.

Si usted decide participar, la información que usted comparta podrá mejorar y expandir los servicios de salud emocional/mental para inmigrantes. Yo pienso que estos servicios pueden ser mejorados, con su participación y su experiencia podemos lograr esto. Su participación puede ser también una excelente oportunidad para contar su historia y reflexionar. Espero que usted disfrute el compartir su historia y se de cuenta que con ello ha contribuido a una área de conocimiento que es muy importante pero no siempre reconocida. De antemano yo le agradezco porque la información que usted comparta me ayudara con mi progreso para apoyar y servir de mejor manera a otros, como trabajadora social. Mi intención es trabajar con inmigrantes después de graduarme, y he escogido este tema para mi tesis de maestría con el propósito de expandir la literatura sobre como, un trabajador social o terapeuta puede prestar servicios efectivamente a mujeres Mexicanas inmigrantes.

Yo entiendo y respeto la sensibilidad de este tema. Por esa razón y por ética de mi carrera, voy a mantener sus respuestas del cuestionario y entrevista de una forma discreta a toda persona, de tal manera que su identidad este protegida en todo momento. Yo seré la persona principal en manejar la información, incluyendo la transcripción; cualquier persona asistiendo con la transcripción de la entrevista tendrá que firmar un documento donde se compromete a mantener todo confidencial. Mi consejera del estudio no tendrá ningún tipo de información hasta que yo haya quitado toda la información que la identifique. Yo guardaré los cuestionarios y transcripciones por tres años, tiempo que es consistente con las regulaciones federales. Durante este tiempo, cuestionarios y transcripciones serán guardados en un gabinete bajo llave, al cual solo yo tengo acceso. Después que el periodo de los tres años haya pasado todos los materiales serán destruidos.

Usted quizá, quizás no, sienta incomodidad o estrés por el hecho de hablar de su vida y sus memorias sobre la transición de emigrar a los Estados Unidos. Yo estoy proporcionándole abajo de este documento una lista de referencias con los nombres y números de teléfono de recursos de agencias donde ofrecen servicios en español donde usted puede consultar si tiene cualquier problema durante o después de la entrevista. Espero que la entrevista no cause ninguna incomodidad, pero en caso de que ocurra deseo que usted pueda hablar con alguien que le pueda asistir.

La participación en este estudio es voluntaria, y usted puede rehusar el contestar cualquier pregunta o terminar con la entrevista en cualquier momento. Usted tiene el derecho de pedirme que la saque del estudio si así lo desea después de la entrevista, con la fecha limite del 1 de Abril del 2007. Su petición será aceptada sin ninguna penalidad. Si usted decide el salirse del estudio todos los materiales que se relacionen con su participación serán destruidos de inmediato. Usted me puede contactar directamente. Mi información personal esta incluida abajo.

Nidia A. Ponce  
303-356-1826  
nponce@email.smith.edu

SU FIRMA EN LA PARTE DE ABAJO INDICA QUE USTED A LEIDO Y ENTIENDE LA INFORMACION PRESENTADA EN ESTE DOCUMENTO, ASI COMO TAMBIEN QUE USTED HA TENIDO LA OPORTUNIDAD DE HACERME PREGUNTAS SOBRE EL ESTUDIO, SUS DERECHOS COMO PARTICIPANTE, Y QUE USTED ESTA DE ACUERDO EN PARTICIPAR EN ESTE ESTUDIO.

---

Firma del Participante

---

Fecha

---

Firma del Investigador

---

Fecha

Nidia A. Ponce  
303-356-1826  
[nponce@email.smith.edu](mailto:nponce@email.smith.edu)

Por favor de guardar una copia de este documento para sus records.

¡GRACIAS!

## APPENDIX C

### RESOURCE LIST – LISTA DE RECURSOS

- Aurora Mental Health Center

10782 East Alameda Avenue

Aurora, Colorado 80012

303-617-2400

303-617-2385

[www.aumhc.org](http://www.aumhc.org)

- Servicios de La Raza, Inc.

4055 Tejon St.

Denver, CO 80211

303-458-5851

Hours

Monday-Friday

8:00AM to 5:00PM

[www.serviciosdelaraza.org](http://www.serviciosdelaraza.org)

- Centro de la Esperanza

655 Broadway

Suite 450

Denver, CO 80203

303-480-1920

APPENDIX D

DEMOGRAPHIC FORM

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Year of Immigration: \_\_\_\_\_ Years in the U.S. \_\_\_\_\_

Relationship Status: (Please circle all that apply)

\*Single \*married \*divorced/separated \*partnered \*other \_\_\_\_\_

Do you have? \*Children \*No Children

Religion, if any? \_\_\_\_\_

Do you speak English? \*a little \*some \*none

Educational Level: (Please circle all that apply)

\*Elementary school \*Middle school

Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

Who in your family lives here in the United States? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Who in your family lives in Mexico? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX D2

**FORMA DE DATOS DEMOGRAFICOS**

Nombre: \_\_\_\_\_ Edad: \_\_\_\_\_

Lugar de Nacimiento: \_\_\_\_\_

Edad cuando imigró a los Estados Unidos: \_\_\_\_\_

Tiempo de vivir en los Estados Unidos: \_\_\_\_\_

Por favor de marque su respuesta:

*Estado Civil:* \*Casada \*Soltera \*Divorciada \*Otra: \_\_\_\_\_

\*Con Hijos \*Sin Hijos Cuantos: \_\_\_\_\_

*Educación:* \*Primaria \*Secundaria

Ocupación: \_\_\_\_\_

*¿Habla Ingles?* \*Un poco \*Mucho \*Nada

Religión: \_\_\_\_\_

¿Quienes de su familia viven aquí?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

¿Quienes de su familia viven en México?

\_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX E

### INTERVIEW GUIDE

“Could you please share your story with me and consider incorporating some of these areas as you talk about how it has been for you to emigrate from Mexico to the United States.”

1. Why did you decide to come to this country?
2. What brought you to the Denver area?  
(What changes did the move make in your life?)
3. What has gone well?
4. What has not gone so well?
5. What helped made the transition better?
6. What would you recommend to other people to make the transition go smoother?
7. If there are aspects of your native country that you missed, what are those aspects?
8. Knowing what you know now, what would you do differently in preparation for this transition?
9. How do you feel about yourself and how do you describe yourself now (compare to before immigrating)?
10. What would you like for social workers/therapists to know about your experience in order to help Mexican women in similar transitions?

## APPENDIX E2

### GUIA PARA LA ENTREVISTA

“Me podría compartir su historia de como fue el emigrar de México a los Estados Unidos, y si dentro de su historia puede hablar sobre estas áreas:”

1. ¿Porque decidió el emigrar a los Estados Unidos?
2. ¿Que la trajo al área de Denver?
3. ¿Cuales son las cosas buenas que han ocurrido por haber emigrado?
4. ¿Cuales son las cosas no buenas?
5. ¿Cuales fueron las cosas que le han ayudado con la transición?
6. ¿Que le recomendaría a otras mujeres para que su transición fuera más fácil?
7. ¿Si, hay aspectos de su tierra natal que le hacen falta o extraña, cuales son esos aspectos?
8. ¿Sabiendo lo que hoy sabe, que hubiera hecho diferente en prepararse para esta transición de emigrar?
9. ¿Como se siente y se describe a si misma?
10. ¿Que le gustaría que las terapeutas/psicólogos supieran acerca de su experiencia para que comprendieran mejor a otras mujeres con experiencias similares?



APPENDIX F

**RECRUITMENT POSTER**

**Are you a woman who immigrated to the United States from Mexico when you were 18 or older and have lived here for 3 years or more?**

**Would you like to share your experiences of moving from your birth country to the United States and contribute to a social work research project?**

**If you (or someone you know) are interested in sharing your experience as part of a Master's thesis project about what moving to the United States was like for you, please contact:**

**Nidia A. Ponce**

**303-356-1826**

**[nponce@email.smith.edu](mailto:nponce@email.smith.edu)**

**All the information will be kept confidential and I will explain you more when you call me. If you have any questions or want to learn more about the study please feel free to contact me. I will be happy to answer any questions or doubts you may have.**

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<b>Sharing My Story</b>  <b>-Study-</b>  <b>Call Nidia</b> <b>303-356-1826</b>	<b>Sharing My Story</b>  <b>-Study-</b>  <b>Call Nidia</b> <b>303-356-1826</b>	<b>Sharing My Story</b>  <b>-Study-</b>  <b>Call Nidia</b> <b>303-356-1826</b>	<b>Sharing My Story</b>  <b>-Study-</b>  <b>Call Nidia</b> <b>303-356-1826</b>
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APPENDIX F2

**POSTER PARA RECLUTAMIENTO DEL ESTUDIO**

**¿Es usted una mujer que emigro de México a los Estados Unidos cuando tenia 18 años de edad o mayor y hace 3 o mas años que esta viviendo en este país?**

**¿Le gustaría compartir sus experiencias de como fue para usted el moverse de su tierra natal a este país y así contribuir para una tesis en la disciplina de trabajo social clínico?**

**Si usted o alguien que conoce esta interesada en compartir sus experiencias para ayudar con este proyecto sobre como fue para usted el moverse a los Estados Unidos por favor comuníquese conmigo:**

Nidia A. Ponce

303-356-1826

[nponce@email.smith.edu](mailto:nponce@email.smith.edu)

Contando Mi  
Historia  
  
Llamar a Nidia  
303-356-1826

Contando Mi  
Historia  
  
Llamar a Nidia  
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