A Qualitative Inquiry of Latino Immigrants’ Work Experiences in the Midwest

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Latino immigrants are the largest source of immigrant workers in the United States. In this study, 11 first-generation Latino immigrants (8 men, 3 women) living in the Midwest were interviewed about their work experiences. Interview data were analyzed using consensual qualitative research methods (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997). Five domains associated with the data included work for survival and power, work for social connections, work as self-determination, work barriers in the Midwest, and access to work in the Midwest. We identify ways in which vocational psychologists can intervene to work effectively with Latino newcomers seeking employment in the United States and to support their transition into new settlement communities. Suggestions for future research with immigrant workers are discussed.

Keywords: Latinos, immigrants, career development, work, immigrant psychology

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The United States has long relied on the work of immigrants (Andersson, Garcia-Perez, Haltiwanger, McCue, & Sanders, 2010), and the rapid growth of the foreign-born community ensures their continued involvement in the labor force at levels never before seen in this country. At 11% of the U.S. population, the foreign-born community is at its highest since 1930 (Gibson & Jung, 2006). A significant portion (53%) of immigrants come from Latin American countries, and Mexico is the largest source, representing 32%, or 12.7 million, of the U.S. foreign-born population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). Compared to other foreign-born groups, Latinos tend to be younger and to have lower levels of education, lower incomes, larger households, and higher poverty rates (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009). In addition, they are more likely to be in the labor force than other immigrants; to work in low skilled, physically demanding, and low paying occupations, or “brown-collar” jobs (Catanzarite, 2002); and to secure jobs that do not require English language skills (Burgos, 2002; Dale et al., 2005; Fuentes, 2007).

Psychology can contribute valuable knowledge regarding the immigrant experience; however, it lags behind other disciplines (e.g., sociology, economics, anthropology) in producing scholarship in this area (Berry, 2001; Rumbaut, 1999). Literature in sociology addresses the changing nature of work and the increasing reliance upon a foreign-born workforce in the United States, the racialization processes that affect immigrants’ integration into workplaces and racially homogenous communities, and host communities’ perceptions of foreign-born workers (Cisel, Smith, & Mendoza, 2003; Fennelly, 2008; Hetzler, Medina, & Overfelt, 2007; Valentine, 2005). Employers recruit immigrants, especially Latinos, for employment in rapidly expanding logistical industries because of employers’ perceptions that they are reliable and amenable to the conditions of flexible work (Cisel et al., 2003). Latino immigrants are also increasingly finding employment in industries that are historically housed in Midwestern rural communities such as meatpacking, poultry processing, and dairy. The implementation of federal policies supporting immigration and employment had the unintended consequence of establishing and allowing for the continuation of immigration to Midwestern agricultural rural communities (Valentine, 2005). As native-born workers increasingly leave rural areas to seek employment in cities, immigrants fill the gap in rural depopulation (Fennelly, 2008; Valentine, 2005).

The consequences of the recruitment and employment of Latino immigrants have uneven implications. On the one hand, employers benefit from a workforce that is flexible and seemingly willing to accept the terms of “spot market” working conditions where companies can hire workers on an as needed basis. For example, research revealed that employers bank on Latino immigrants’ willingness to change locations and shifts, to work overtime, and to report to new jobs in a moments’ notice (Valentine, 2005). In
other industries, such as meatpacking and poultry processing, employment practices (i.e., closing unionized firms and re-opening as non-union shops) and dangerous or difficult working conditions serve as disincentives for native-born workers while simultaneously attracting foreign-born workers who are seeking full-time, steady employment with relatively high wages (Fennelly, 2008). On the other hand, employers’ economic preference for hiring Latino immigrants contributes to negative social outcomes such as prejudice against newcomers.

The influx of Latino immigrants into regions that have not historically contained a significant Latino population creates the perception that Latinos pose an economic and symbolic threat to the native-born population (Fennelly, 2008; Hetzler et al., 2007). The arrival of large numbers of immigrant and migrant workers in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina contributed to the perception that native-born African Americans would be permanently displaced and that the city would consequently transform into “Nueve” Orleans (Hetzler et al., 2007). In the Minnesota meatpacking town of “Devereux,” White middle-class residents believed that Latino immigrants and Somali refugees would have negative impacts on crime rates, business, school budgets, and property values (Fennelly, 2008). Furthermore, middle-class and working-class Whites of Devereux indicated that lack of English proficiency among newcomer Latinos was a clear indication of their unwillingness to integrate into mainstream American culture (Fennelly, 2008). The perceived economic and symbolic threats posed by Latino immigrants was most acutely felt by working class individuals in Devereux who blamed the immigrants for cuts in welfare and the loss of jobs among the native-born population (Fennelly, 2008).

The psychology literature on immigrants primarily examines their mental health and adjustment to the host society, and relatively little is known about their experiences in the workplace in spite of the critical role that work plays in one’s psychological health and functioning (Blustein, 2008). In response to calls to draw more attention to the work experiences of immigrants (Bhagat & London, 1999; Gans, 1999; Lopes, 2006) and low-wage, nonprofessional workers (Blustein, 2006; Udegraft, Crouter, Umaña-Taylor, & Cansler, 2007; Weaver, 2002), the current study contributes to the vocational psychology literature by focusing on the career development of Latino immigrants.

The study Latino immigrants’ career development is timely and has important implications for vocational psychology research, theory, and practice. First, as noted earlier, U.S. immigration rates are steadily increasing, with Latinos representing the largest group of immigrants. However, empirical knowledge about Latino immigrants’ work experiences is scant. A review of the vocational psychology literature between 1990 and 2010 revealed 35 articles on U.S. immigrants across four career journals (Flores, Hsieh, & Chiao, 2011). Among these, two empirical studies were on adult Latino immigrants (Orozco, 2010; Shimmar, 2007). Data-driven psychological studies that provide an in-depth understanding of Latino immigrants’ experiences with work in the United States are essential for career interventions and the development of theories related to immigrants’ career development. Second, current anti-immigration policies and negative attitudes toward immigrants (Yakushko, 2009) and Latinos (Niemann, 2001) may create a hostile environment for Latino immigrants as they seek work. Finally, Latino immigrants represent a vulnerable group of workers in the United States, and cases of work-related abuse and exploitation of Latino immigrants have been documented (Maldonado, 2006; Perilla, Wilson, & Wold, 1998; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2007). This immigrant group characterizes the marginalized workers that are missing in vocational psychology research and for which Blustein (2006, 2008) has advocated for extending career knowledge.

**Latino Immigrant Research**

Although scholars have encouraged researchers to examine generation differences and other relevant cultural variables in immigrant samples (e.g., Suárez-Orozco, 2007), we identified few studies with adult, Latino immigrants that adhered to this recommended practice. In an examination of work attitudes among first, second, and third generation English-speaking Mexican Americans in the labor force, first generation Mexican Americans reported less job security than second and third generation Mexican Americans (Weaver, 2002). Others reported that acculturation to U.S. culture and higher levels of English language usage were significant predictors of career self-efficacy (Miranda & Uhmoefer, 1998) and career options (Hite, 2007) among Latino immigrants. Finally, among a sample of working-class Mexican American parents, lower levels of acculturation were related to job satisfaction (Barnett, Del Campo, Del Campo, & Steiner, 2003). Acculturation moderated the relationship between work–family balance and job satisfaction; this relationship was stronger for parents with lower levels of acculturation.

**Immigrant Worker Characteristics**

Survey studies provide a snapshot of Latino immigrant workers and highlight regional and with-in group differences among these workers. Using 1990 census data of Mexican immigrant women who arrived in the United States in the 1980s, Greenlees and Saenz (1999) found that those with higher levels of education, stronger English language skills, longer tenure in the United States, husbands who were working, husbands with lower incomes, and no preschool children were more likely to be employed. Another study indicated that immigrants in the Northeast reported gender differences in employment and wages, with Latinas securing jobs in lower level service jobs and men securing more visibly prominent jobs (Fuentes, 2007). Two studies of Latino immigrants in the Midwest found that immigrants in the Kansas City area found work relatively easily, but job stability was low (Lewis, 2008), and immigrants in a rural Iowa community reported industrial experiences in communications, construction, industrial service, and manufacturing (Baker & Hotek, 2003). Lewis (2008) also reported that recent immigrants, men, and immigrants living in the suburbs located work faster than their counterparts, whereas English proficiency was not significantly related to time to secure employment or wages. Respondents indicated that they changed jobs due to better pay, exploitation, termination, transportation issues, and childcare. Finally, Mexican women earned lower wages than men in the Northeast (Fuentes, 2007) but not in the Midwest (Lewis, 2008).

**Immigration and Work Motivations**

Immigrants come to the United States for a variety of reasons, including economic, familial, and political factors (Santiago-Rivera, Arredondo, & Gallardo-Cooper, 2002; Yakushko, 2009),
and two samples of Latina immigrants indicated that men in the family typically made the decision to immigrate to the United States (Burgos, 2002; Fuentes, 2007). Many immigrants migrate when opportunities in their home country are limited due to the country’s poor economy (Burgos, 2002; Fuentes, 2007; Perreira, Chapman, & Stein, 2006; Rumbaut, 1994), with the hope of providing their children with a better future (Perreira et al., 2006) or to reunite with family (Fuentes, 2007; Perreira et al., 2006). Underemployment in one’s home country is a strong driving force in Mexicans’ decision to migrate (Rumbaut, 1994). However, because most Mexican immigrants are employed in their home country before migrating (Kochhar, 2005), other economic pull factors may include the promise of better wages, enhanced quality of work, and perceptions that more opportunities are available in the United States.

A prior qualitative study of Latina immigrants from Caribbean countries and a case study of two Latino immigrants indicated that they defined work as an activity one does to earn money (Burgos, 2002) and as a luxury and way to support training and business opportunities in their home country (Dale et al., 2005), respectively. Latino immigrants were drawn to rural communities in Virginia and Oklahoma because of work availability (Garza, 2005; Zarrugh, 2007) and the presence of family and friend networks (Garza, 2005), and they were motivated to earn money for family in their home country (Zarrugh, 2007).

In a qualitative study of predictors to career advancement and promotion of 17 Mexican immigrant service workers in Las Vegas, Shinmar (2007) found that most of these workers hoped to advance in their careers. However, these aspirations did not necessarily include upward mobility but rather securing employment that was less demanding and offered better pay. Participants believed that their limited English proficiency served as a barrier to advancement, but many were unable to take classes due to accessibility or family responsibilities.

Individual and community factors have also been addressed as key determinants of migration. Boneva and Frieze (2001) hypothesized that personality characteristics, such as strong work orientation and achievement, distinguished those who are willing to immigrate. In addition, researchers have suggested that a “culture of migration” may develop in some communities (Kandel & Massey, 2002) where migration becomes normative.

Barriers and Supports

Barriers to immigrants’ adjustment include language (Burgos, 2002; Dale et al., 2005; Perilla et al., 1998; Perreira et al., 2006; Shinmar, 2007), financial hardships (Dalla, Gupta, Lopez, & Jones, 2006), strain on family roles (Burgos, 2002; Dalla et al., 2006; Hirsch, 1999; Menjivar, 1999; Perreira et al., 2006), discrimination (Perilla et al., 1998; Perreira et al., 2006; Shinmar, 2007), and separation from family who remain in the home country (Alderete, Vega, Kolody, & Aguilar-Gaziola, 1999; Grzywacz, Quandt, Arcury, & Marin, 2005; Grzywacz et al., 2006; Magaña & Hovey, 2003; Perreira et al., 2006). Investigations of Mexican migrant farm workers (Alderete et al., 1999; Grzywacz et al., 2007; Magaña & Hovey, 2003; Perilla et al., 1998) indicated that these workers identified a number of stressors related to their work, including rigid work demands, unpredictable work, poor pay, language barriers, hard physical labor, lack of transportation, work–family conflict, exploitation by employees or supervisors (e.g., not receiving overtime pay), discrimination, and documentation status.

These stressors play a role in Latino immigrants’ psychological functioning. Finch, Catalano, Novaco, and Vega (2003) reported that employment hardship was related to higher risk of alcohol abuse and dependence among Mexican migrants. Other studies found that acculturative stress (Alderete et al., 1999; Hovey, 2000; Hovey & Magaña, 2000, 2002) and higher work–family strain (Grzywacz et al., 2007, 2005, 2006) were related to high rates of anxiety or depression among Mexican immigrants. It is important to note that Latino immigrants want help to cope with these stressors. Specifically, Perreira et al. (2006) reported that a sample of Latino immigrants expressed a desire to seek assistance from the church, community centers, and professional counselors in their adjustment process.

Family and friends are critical support networks for Latino immigrants in their transition to the United States and locating work (Alderete et al., 1999; Fuentes, 2007) and are believed to be one of the factors accounting for concentrations of immigrant workers in certain work settings (Andersson et al., 2010). Indeed, Garcia (2005) found that Mexican immigrants in Oklahoma relied on three distinct networks for locating work, including family and friends, church, and employer networks. Participants relied mostly on family and friends within the immigrant community to locate employment, and networking was essential in securing employment and in subsequent adjustment to the community.

Current Study

Despite the significant presence of Latino immigrants in the United States, who mostly come to the United States for work, vocational psychology has devoted little attention to their career development. Recent migration shifts among Latino immigrants are creating new immigrant communities in the Midwest that have experienced little cultural diversity in the past (Engstrom, 2000). Unlike prior studies of immigrants living and working in established immigrant communities in the Southwest, West, and Northeast and in large urban areas, new settlement communities and employers in these communities may be less prepared to meet the needs of the Latino workers. Investigating immigrants living in new settlement communities provides a unique context to understand how Latino immigrants navigate the process of seeking and maintaining employment in areas that do not have the infrastructures and services available to help immigrants. Thus, the current study makes a contribution to the literature by addressing the following research question: “What are the work experiences of Latino immigrants living in emerging immigrant communities in the Midwest?”

This exploratory investigation provides a contextualized understanding of Latino immigrants’ work experiences. The study is discovery-oriented and inspired by Blustein’s (2006, 2008) recent challenges to counseling psychologists to extend our empirical knowledge base in vocational psychology to non-professional, non-privileged workers. This has led to Blustein’s (2001, 2006) development of the psychology of working framework, a new perspective about working that seeks to rectify the privileged assumptions that serve as the basis for traditional career development theories. The psychology of working attempts to provide a
more inclusive understanding of working and posits that work meets three main needs: survival, relatedness, and self-determination. This approach assumes that individuals may hold varied perspectives about work and their work identities. In addition, this framework focuses on dimensions of privilege (e.g., socioeconomic class, race/ethnicity, immigration status) that are relevant to one’s access to resources that influence work opportunities and the work experiences of a broad range of individuals in the United States. The psychology of work has served as the foundation for recent studies that have investigated conceptions of work with marginalized workers including diverse samples of youths (Blustein et al., 2002, 2010; Chaves et al., 2004; Juntunen et al., 2001; Kenny et al., 2007; Medive & Blustein, 2010; Noonan, Hall, & Blustein, 2007), Asian American professionals (Fouad et al., 2008), and Italian youths (Ferrari et al., 2009); we seek to extend this knowledge to Latino immigrants in emerging Midwestern immigrant communities.

Recent work (Yakushko, 2009; Yakushko, Backhaus, Watson, Ngaruiya, & Gonzalez, 2008) suggests that qualitative studies are an ideal start because of the scant work on immigrants. Qualitative inquiry is appropriate when researchers are interested in a discovery-oriented approach of how people construct meaning of a phenomenon (Creswell, Hanson, Plano, & Morales, 2007). In this case, a qualitative approach was deemed appropriate to address our research question because the few work-related studies conducted on Latino immigrants in the Midwest have been largely descriptive data from survey research that report employment rates and types of employment. Because very little is known about immigrant workers’ experiences, we believe that qualitative methodology would provide the rich, descriptive data we were seeking about their job experiences in Midwest communities. We use consensual qualitative research (CQR; Hill et al., 2005; Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997), which is primarily constructivist, to explore the work experiences of a sample of 11 first-generation Latino immigrants in the U.S. labor force in the Midwest.

Method

Participants

Participants were 11 Latino immigrants (8 men, 3 women) who had immigrated to the United States within 10 years at the time of the interview. Nine were from Mexico, and two were from El Salvador. They described several factors that served as motivators for immigrating to the United States, including economic opportunities (n = 9); pre-established connections to the United States (n = 8); educational opportunities in the United States (n = 2); and push factors, or conditions in one’s home country that lead to immigration (n = 4). Participants’ ages ranged from 24 to 66 years. Eight were married, two were single, and one was widowed. One participant had a second-grade education, two were educated through middle school, two completed high school, one completed 1 year of college, and one had a college degree. Four participants worked in poultry processing, two in lumber processing, two in container conditioning, one in maintenance, one in roofing, and one in respirator mask manufacturing. Descriptive data for each participant are reported in Table 1.

Researchers

The research team consisted of eight women researchers: a Mexican American professor, four Mexican American doctoral students, two White doctoral students, and a Chinese doctoral student. One member of the team is in sociology, and all other team members are in counseling psychology. Three of the members are bilingual. Of the Mexican American team members, two self-identified as first generation, two as second generation, one as third generation, and one as fourth generation. Their research interests include Latino psychology, Latino cultural values, career development of Mexican Americans and international students, and multicultural issues.

Research team members were trained and had extensive discussions regarding culturally sensitive research practices with Latino immigrants (Ojeda, Flores, Rosales, & Morales, 2011), some of which are highlighted in the sections that follow. The members of the research team had a discussion of personal biases and expectations of the findings at the start of the project. On the basis of both personal and professional experiences with Latinos and immigrants and our knowledge of the literature, we expected that participants’ primary reason for being in the Midwest was for work opportunities and that they would be working in low-paying, labor intensive jobs common among Latino immigrants. We believed that the well-being of the family would be a strong motivator for being in the United States and that their ultimate goal was to return to their home countries. We expected that immigration status

<table>
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<th>Participant Descriptions</th>
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<td><strong>Pseudonym</strong></td>
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<td>Juan</td>
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<td>David</td>
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<td>Miguel</td>
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<td>Laura</td>
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<td>Eduardo</td>
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<td>Martin</td>
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*Note.* A dash represents instances in which demographic data were not provided or participants chose not to share this information.
would be a source of concern and fear for several of them and that work would consume a significant part of their time. In addition, because the rural/semi-rural Midwest has not been a traditional settlement point for Latino immigrants, we believed the participants would experience discrimination within their communities and work settings, that social support networks would be limited, and that language would be a barrier to integrating. We expected that these participants would experience struggles in adjusting to the United States and, particularly, life in the Midwest. We documented members’ biases and had copies of them during data analysis meetings to monitor our own and others’ interpretations of the data. Throughout the data analysis process, members served as “checks” on one another to ensure that the coding was not influenced by our biases.

**Interview Protocol**

A semi-structured interview was developed based on the career development, immigrant, and Latino psychology literatures. We reviewed protocols used in prior studies (i.e., Chaves et al., 2004; Kenny et al., 2007; Perreira et al., 2006), adapted questions for our sample and generated new questions, and went through several iterations as a team before finalizing the interview protocol. The English version was translated into Spanish and back-translated into English following recommended procedures. Thus, English and Spanish versions were available for the interviews. The protocol was pilot tested with a 38-year-old Latino immigrant working in the lumber industry and a 26-year-old Latino whose parents were immigrants and was modified based on their feedback (ordering of questions, adding follow-up probes for some questions). Questions on the interview protocol (see the Appendix in the supplemental materials) explored participants’ current work setting, reasons for moving to the United States, work experiences, work skills and barriers, and definitions of work. Following the interview, participants completed a demographic form to obtain information on gender, age, relational status, country of origin, income, education, and length of stay in the United States.

**Procedure**

**Recruitment.** Recruitment efforts focused on a Latino-oriented community center, churches with Spanish-language services, restaurants and markets that catered to Latinos, and other community services that Latinos frequent. Members of the research team posted flyers in Spanish and English that described the study and provided brief presentations on the study. Additional recruitment efforts included word-of-mouth, personal contacts, and using key stakeholders in the Latino community to identify potential participants. The majority of participants were recruited via snowball techniques and at churches with Spanish-language services. In consultation with members of the immigrant community regarding potential incentives, participants were offered a $20.00 grocery store certificate for their participation.

**Interview procedures.** Interviews were audiorecorded and conducted by two members of the team, one who was bilingual and another who acted as an observer. The observer recorded field notes during the interviews, noting information about the setting in which the interview took place and non-verbal behaviors of the participant. Identifying information and legal status were not obtained to ensure participants’ privacy and confidentiality of information. Interviews were conducted in-home or in a private setting at a church to increase participants’ comfort level and to increase confianza (trust) with the participants. Participants had the option of doing the interview in Spanish or English; all interviews were conducted in Spanish. The interviews took approximately 1–1.5 hr to complete. The audiotaped interviews were translated into English by the interviewer and were simultaneously transcribed by a second member of the team. The English transcription was reviewed for accuracy against the audiotaped interview by another member of the team who was fluent in Spanish but who did not participate in the original translation of the interview to ensure that the richness and meaning of responses were not lost in translation. The observer typed the field notes, and these notes accompanied the transcription of the interview so that the researchers not involved in the interviews could better contextualize the participants’ responses.

**Data analysis.** We followed CQR (Hill et al., 2005, 1997) methods to analyze the data. Training consisted of three 1.5–2 hr meetings led by the senior author. All members of the team read the work of Hill and colleagues along with published studies that used CQR methodology. The four members of the analysis team had a discussion about recognizing each person’s opinion throughout the analysis process to ensure equal involvement and valuing of everyone’s perspectives. All members indicated that they felt comfortable disagreeing with anyone in the group. The members shared their biases with the group prior to beginning the analysis, and others were asked to keep these in check as the data analysis unfolded. The members of the analysis team individually generated domains that may be important to the study. This initial set of domains was based on assumptions and knowledge we had about Latinos, immigrants, and career development, and the interview protocol. Next, each member of the team coded data for one interview into each of the domains and then met as a group to explain the interpretation of each statement and to reach a consensus on coding the data. This process was repeated for each subsequent interview; we created a rotation order in which each member of the team facilitated the coding discussions for an interview and took notes of the analysis meeting. During the coding process, the domains were adjusted by adding, dropping, and combining domains, resulting in a total of five domains for subsequent coding. The final set of domains included work as survival and power, work for social connections, work as self-determination, barriers, and access. Once all of the interview data were coded into domains, members individually abstracted the data, or developed core ideas. Core ideas were created to summarize the data content across domains for each interview. The team then met to discuss the core ideas and to gain consensus that information captured in each domain was included in the core idea. The next step of the analysis included establishing categories based on the core ideas that were generated across the cases. Individual team members brainstormed categories for each domain independently and then met as a team to reach consensus on the categories and their wording as well as the assignment of the core ideas to categories. No new categories or domains were generated after the analysis of the ninth interview, so the team concluded that data saturation was achieved. A research team member not involved in the coding served as an auditor and provided feedback on all stages of the analysis.
Validation strategies. Trustworthiness of the findings was achieved through a rigorous and thorough consensus process where the analysis team members discussed the data and coding, addressed personal biases that would influence perspectives of the data, and engaged in dialogues to achieve agreement. Notes were taken to reflect the analysis process and were reviewed to ensure that we were consistent in our coding across all interview transcripts. In addition, credibility of our findings is supported by rich quotes from our participants that are used to illustrate categories within each domain.

Results

Five domains emerged from the data: survival and power, social connections, self-determination, barriers to work, and access to work. Conventional labels were used to describe how representative each category was for the sample. General (or most, several) describes categories that applied to 10–11 cases, typical (or some) applied to 6–9 cases, and variant (or few) included 2–5 cases. Categories that applied to one case are not reported. See Table 2 for the general, typical, and variant categories that emerged in the analysis. For ease in reporting findings, general and typical categories are described in detail under separate subheaders, and 2–3 variant categories are highlighted within a single subheader across domains.

Work for Survival and Power

Survival and power represents participants’ experiences with work based on obtaining the resources needed for survival; to enhance their social and financial statuses; and to access resources such as education, knowledge, training, status, and prestige. Five general categories (demanding, difficult work; improve family situation; basic necessities; enhance skills and training; and advancement and promotion) and four variant categories were identified that reflected participants’ experiences with work as a means for survival and power. Frequencies for each category are provided in Table 2.

Demanding, difficult work. The analysis team had lengthy discussions regarding this category and its domain classification. Because this was one of two categories that every participant addressed in their interviews in their discussions about work, we believed it was a key aspect of their work lives to include. We ultimately included it in this domain as we felt that participants’ willingness to take these types of jobs (i.e., jobs in construction, manufacturing) and to work in dangerous conditions reflected their need for employment and their motivation to work for the family’s survival.

Every participant related to work as hard and painstaking, indicating that the work they did was dangerous, physically taxing, or demanding. These participants did not like the intensity of the work, repetitive tasks, and high productivity expectations, and they found work to be boring, tiring, hard, and stressful but thought it was better to work under these circumstances than not work at all. “But it’s boring. Well, it’s not that boring, but you get tired.” [Juan] “At first, it was a little hard because I wasn’t used to it. And you have to do it really fast. It’s really fast.” [Laura]

Participants addressed dangerous work conditions and high rates of workplace injuries. Examples of dangerous work environments include the following:

When I’m cutting the containers, sometimes there is a lot of smoke and you breathe it in and it harms you . . . sometimes the containers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>General (10–11 cases)</th>
<th>Typical (6–9 cases)</th>
<th>Variant (2–5 cases)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Work for survival and power</td>
<td>Demanding, difficult work (11)</td>
<td>Improve English (5); Maintain employment (4); No goals (4); Work/pay variability (3)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Improve family circumstances (11)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Basic necessities (10)</td>
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<td>Enhance skills/training (10)</td>
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<td>Advancement and promotion (10)</td>
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<td>Work for social connections</td>
<td>Social relations and support (10)</td>
<td>Positive co-worker interactions (6)</td>
<td>Family members have distinct work roles (5); Avoids relational conflict (5)</td>
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<td>Negative co-worker interactions (9)</td>
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<td>Positive supervisor interactions (9)</td>
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<td>Negative supervisor interactions (6)</td>
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<td>Working with other Latinos (8)</td>
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<td>Religious and spiritual support (8)</td>
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<td>Work as self-determination</td>
<td>Strong work ethic (10)</td>
<td>Likes to work (8)</td>
<td>Recognition (5); Means to future goals (5); Achievement needs (4); Work is a privilege (3); Personal interests (3); Learning needs (3); Independence/autonomy needs (2)</td>
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<td>Barriers to work</td>
<td>English skills (8)</td>
<td>Transportation (5); Unfair treatment (5); Access to opportunities (4); Skills/training (4); Access to information (4); Work demands (2)</td>
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<td>Work documents (8)</td>
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<td>Access to work</td>
<td>Family networks (8)</td>
<td>Other networks (4); Community resources (2); Media (2)</td>
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explode. Three days ago, one container exploded very powerfully. Good thing that there weren’t any injuries. It’s like if somebody throws a bomb. All the workers that were there got scared. [Martin]

I used to be in another different department where I was also packing chicken, but the climate there was making me sick. It felt very hot. A lot of dust. I always had a headache. In fact, they operated [on] my sinuses. My doctor suggested that I change to a different job environment to see if that would help and it did. It felt a lot better. [Javier]

**Improve family circumstances.** All participants indicated that they worked to make money to advance the family’s status and prestige. These participants indicated desires to improve the family’s living and financial situations or to return to their home country after saving enough money. Participants described various types of ways to enhance the family’s status, including building a new home, providing for children’s wants and desires, offering promise for a better future for their children, and obtaining proper documentation for family. This was exemplified in the following statements:

> Because if they [children] don’t have an education, they don’t have work. I tell them how my life is. And I tell them to try their best in school. Because if they don’t, they won’t find a good job. [Martin]

> Right now I am working for my children, to help them build a house . . . My plan is to finish the house and return to Mexico to continue working over there and be with my family . . . I don’t have something that I can leave to my children . . . and I’ve always liked to give my children more. [Eduardo]

Participants also explained other ways they would like to help their family: “Well my only hope is to fix the papers of my children, the ones that are left in the country . . .” [Maria] and “My daughter also turns 15 in September, and I want to have a quinceañera for her because it is a dream for her.” [Graciela] Two participants replied that they hoped to simply “save money and go back” [Jose], but Juan indicated that it “has taken longer than I expected.” Another participant described the difficulty with improving financial situation:

> We haven’t made a future, because we are still renting. In Mexico they say others are making more and are worse off, but others talk just to talk, but we have to pay the telephone, rent, water, others don’t pay rent, but rent takes all your money. [Maria]

**Work for basic necessities.** Generally, participants in the current study regarded work as a necessity to sustain oneself and family and to meet basic needs of food, clothing, and housing. For most participants, work was a means to earn money to live, and this was exemplified in the following quotes:

> [Work is] the fountain of survival. Aside from God that is what humans need to survive, because through that comes food, shelter, clothing. [Javier]

> You have to look [for work] for your life. If you don’t look, you won’t eat, you won’t live. Here you have to work for your life . . . My dad always used to say, “You want something? You have to work. You want shoes? You have to work. You want clothes? You have to work son.” [Eduardo]

**Enhance skills/training.** Participants generally expressed a desire to develop work skills and wanted to take advantage of learning opportunities in the United States, often to transfer positions or seek other employment. These skills included specific skills related to their current place of employment and additional transferable skills, such as computer skills, business administration and assertiveness. One participant described his desire to develop skills as follows:

> It’s not that I don’t like what I do, but I would like to learn to do more. I would like to master other areas of work. Construction, I would like to learn how to do that. It’s very interesting. There are a lot of areas. I don’t know. I would like to be able to have all of the skills required to do everything that is done in the company so that I can transfer to another type of job within the company. [David]

Another participant described a specific skill he was interested in learning more about: “There are machines I don’t know how to operate and I would like to learn. Maybe there is a way.” [Carlos]

**Advancement and promotion.** All but one participant expressed aspirations to succeed at their jobs. These participants indicated desires to advance at their job, to make lateral transfers to better positions, or to seek other employment. Participants indicated that they would like to earn a higher rank at work, receive a raise at work, or be a trainer or a supervisor. Aspirations for advancement and promotion are reflected in the following quotes: “I would like to work in another department where they do the training and they can work in all the plant and work with more people” [Jose], and “if it was up to me, I would like to be in a higher rank.” [Graciela]

**Variant categories.** Four variant categories (see Table 2) reflected work attitudes related to survival and power. One variant category is that participants hoped to learn or improve their English skills for work and to enhance communication. Jose had taken English classes but was concerned about his accent because co-workers told him, “this is the U.S., you’re not supposed to speak with an accent.” A few participants also indicated that their work (and consequently, earnings) varies depending on weather or the promise of more work in other areas. Miguel indicated, “And here in the United States I am not stable . . . at the maximum, I stay 4 months in one place. And then work finishes one place and then you have to move. All the moving.”

**Work for Social Connections**

Social connections include developing interpersonal connections and social networks with others through the workplace and other relationships that motivate or support one in achieving work-related goals and needs. We identified one general (social relations and support), six typical (positive and negative co-worker interactions, positive and negative supervisor interactions, working with other Latinos, and religious and spiritual support), and two variant categories. See Table 2 for frequency of responses across categories in this domain.

**Social relations and support.** Generally, participants indicated that work was a source for developing social support networks. These social networks were comprised of family, friends, and co-workers who they spend leisure time with (e.g., “I like to
socialize with my co-workers sometimes” [Laura]) and whom they rely on to cope with difficult aspects of work. David indicated that he developed social connections through his boss’ family: “They always supported me. And I am referring to everything, money, hospitality, leisure. I know a lot of people through them. I have traveled with them. It was great.”

One participant talked with others at work to seek input on how he was handling a problem at work: “I would talk to somebody about it and they would tell me that I had the right to respond the way I did.” [Javier] Another participant described how his social support network assisted him in navigating a new culture:

Everything was new to me, a new country. I didn’t know anything but thank God the people I arrived with were very good people. They helped me with everything, even learning how to use the pay phone.

And then when I got to my aunt’s house, she explained to me more or less how things run here. [Miguel]

**Positive co-worker interactions.** Typically, participants indicated that they had co-workers who looked out for one another, got along, and supported each other. This is captured in the following interviews: “Sometimes if I need help, they’ll help me. Or if I have too much work, they’ll help me too. And sometimes I’ll help them too. We help each other.” [Martin] and “I have also been able to interact with people [at work] from different nationalities and that has helped me a lot.” [Jose] Finally, Laura described situations in which she helped her co-workers because she knew a little more English and accompanied them on interviews to translate information.

**Negative co-worker interactions.** Participants typically described work environments that created competition among workers and contributed to conflicts, feelings of jealousy, and gossiping. For example, Laura indicated that a co-worker “impeded me from having good material. She tried to impede me from making more pieces.” Participants described a racialized work environment where immigrant workers felt targeted and where White co-workers did not work hard (i.e., “The Americans are lazy, they don’t work.” [Maria]) and “. . . in Mexico they would tell us wonderful things about the Americans. They would say in the U.S. they work 100%, they work like this, and I get here and I realize that is not true.” [Eduardo]). At times, difficult interpersonal interactions with co-workers occurred after the participant received some positive recognition from the employer for her/his work or if the participant was promoted to an “easier” position that was less labor intensive. The quote below is from a participant who did not feel accepted by American co-workers:

Well there is one person in particular at work that looks at us badly. A couple of them who look at us badly, saying things like Mexicans here? Because really they are all Americans there, there aren’t any other Mexicans except me and my brother. And that is when like we’re cleaning the office or something, they stare at us, saying like “what are they doing here.” [Juan]

**Positive supervisor interactions.** Typically, participants described positive interactions with their supervisors. Characteristics included having a good relationship with supervisors (i.e., “Thank God, I have very nice bosses” [Graciela]), receiving positive feedback, feeling supported (i.e., “The people who are above me treat me very well” [David]), and being recognized by their supervisor or boss for good work. One participant said the following:

Well, our boss she likes to give us gifts every year. Makes us food, she likes to invite us to places. She gives us gift cards to Wal-Mart to go shopping. Sometimes she gives us little presents. She makes us feel good. [Juan]

**Negative supervisor interactions.** A typical category reflective of relational experiences in the workplace were negative supervisor experiences, which consisted of mistreatment, discrimination, supervisors who do not or cannot communicate with Latino workers, and supervisors who are more concerned with the output than the workers (i.e., “I asked her a favor once if she could set me up with a doctor appointment, but she just went in circles. She speaks Spanish, but she acted like she didn’t understand me. Sometimes I see that the American [bosses] worry more about the money than the worker.” [Carlos]). Forms of mistreatment occurred when participants felt “cheated” by bosses who did not pay for work completed or paid less than what they promised. Miguel, who worked in construction, described several occasions in which he was lured away from one job to another job with false promises of better pay. This experience of being taken advantage of is also highlighted in the following passage by Juan, where a middle person who contracted the worker took half of the worker’s pay, including raises that he earned:

Participant: The truth is that we don’t work directly with the company. A lady contracts us to work with that company. So then, our salary is a little bit higher, but like you know, we don’t have social security or a green card or anything like that. So she pays us what it is, under the table.

Researcher: Under the table?

Participant: Yeah, so if they pay us 15, she gives us 8 so I only earn like half because of the security. I don’t expect a raise from the company. Perhaps they give it me, but the lady who stays with it is the one who contracted me.

**Working with other Latinos.** Participants also typically indicated that other Latino immigrants or Latino Americans were employed by the same company. References to other co-workers or supervisors who were also Latino were described neutrally in terms the presence of Latino supervisors and workers in the company (i.e., “Well everyone there is Hispanic, there are only a few Americans . . . but there are more Mexicans than Americans there.” [Maria]) or in a negative manner (i.e., “Well what happens is that her [Mexican supervisor’s] husband and brother are there, and so they sometimes don’t work as hard because they feel protected by her. And we all see that, and when she left, we all worked more equally.” [Carlos]).

**Religious and spiritual support.** A final typical category reflected the role of work in connecting participants to their culture through religious and spiritual beliefs. Participants, such as David, connected with others of the same religious faith through work, “The manager for whom I work and his family are Christian. The man for whom I worked for at the barn is also Christian.” In addition, participants indicated that their faith and beliefs supported their work efforts and helped them in dealing with the challenges they confront as workers. Participants indicated that attending church, reading the bible, and prayer/meditation served as important strategies for handling work-related stressors. For example, participants said, “I try to meditate about everything that
is happening [to feel better]" [Juan] and “Yes, I pray to God and hope that it will happen. I have faith.” [Graciela]

**Variant categories.** Two variant categories emerged that reflected the relational issues in the workplace. One of these categories depicted the reciprocal influence of work and family. Participants indicated that distinct work tasks and responsibilities were determined based on one’s gender, age, and family roles. Parents’ responsibilities, especially fathers, were to work outside of the home to earn money for the family, maintaining the house was a woman’s job, and children’s work was to learn and study. These beliefs were reflected in the following quote:

My girl, well, that’s woman’s work. That’s what I think. And the male, that’s who you teach how to work. And well, it is the woman in the house and the man to work . . . Like washing dishes and cooking, that’s woman’s work. And labor is for men. [Miguel]

**Work as Self-Determination**

Self-determination captures the internal and external motivations that drive career decisions, work pursuits, and workplace behaviors. One general (strong work ethic), one typical (likes to work), and seven variant categories emerged for this domain. Frequencies for each category in this domain are provided in Table 2.

**Strong work ethic.** A general self-determination category was participants’ belief that work was a setting to implement a strong work ethic. This was reflected in participants’ attitudes about work and beliefs that work provided an opportunity to develop one’s character as well as their stated values of the benefits of work. Work attitudes indicated a desire to produce good work, to work hard, and to be punctual and responsible. These participants indicated that they rarely, if ever, missed work during their employment. They were willing to work overtime and stayed focused on their work despite difficulties in their work environment. Participants described their strong work ethic in a variety of ways:

My parents taught me that when you work at a company, you are part of that company and you are going to take care of that company until your last day there. [David]

To be punctual. And to do your work like it’s supposed to be done. To be honest with your work. Be honest with yourself and with your boss . . . That’s what I’ve learned at the factory, to do a job quickly and to also do quality work. It doesn’t make sense to do a lot of work if you do it poorly . . . I think it is very important to do a quality work and everything that they ask of you. [Laura]

To do things well. That’s what maintains us with a calm mind because sometimes I haven’t done things right and my mind is what doesn’t leave me alone. You know what, you did things poorly. So I have to go back and do things the way they are supposed to be done. [Juan]

One time I missed work because I was sick. Everyone noticed I was gone and they were asking for me! . . . That day the boss didn’t count my sick day. He gave me a vacation day because that is the only day I’ve ever missed work. They probably say she’s always here! [Graciela]

A strong work ethic was also expressed in participants’ willingness to put the company’s interests ahead of their own and to do what was required of them at work in spite of the difficult aspects of the job identified earlier. Participants said, “Whatever they have me do, I do it. Even if there is something extra to do, I’ll do it.” [Graciela] and “We’re always yes, yes, yes. Be it heavy, be it whatever we need to take, [we do it].” [Juan] In general, participants demonstrated a strong work ethic and strong character in the workplace and believed that these attributes were recognized and valued by employers.

In addition to these attributes, strong work ethic also reflected the belief that work was a basic human right and that work all should be valued. Participants believed that all individuals, regardless of their backgrounds or immigration status, should have the opportunity to work if they wanted to do so. These participants viewed work as a fundamental human right that should not be defined by national borders. As one participant said, “And I say well in the eyes of God it is not a crime. Here it is a crime, but in the eyes of God it is not because we are not stealing anything.” [Graciela] Finally, these participants recognized that jobs were valued differently in the United States; however, they saw value in all work. This sentiment was reflected by participants who said, “Well, just that because the work is the same . . . Yeah, for us it is just pure work.” [Miguel] and “Working here is the same as anywhere as long as you work with honor and integrity and dedication.” [Javier]

**Likes to work.** Typically, participants stated that they worked because of an intrinsic appreciation for working; some had a preference to work outdoors, some liked their current job more than the prior one, and some liked the social environment at work. One participant described, “I feel satisfied doing all the things I know how to, even if it goes unrecognized, I like to do it.” [Eduardo] Others had similar feelings, “Well, I like to work; whatever they have me do, I do it. Even if there is something extra to do, I’ll do it. Even if they don’t pay me or recognize me, I like to do it.” [Graciela]; “I like to work and so it hasn’t been that hard for me. If they tell me there is work on the weekend, I go work or if my friends invite me to go work, I’ll go.” [Eduardo]; and “Perhaps we’re used to it . . . heavy duty work. Perhaps that’s what it is, one of the reasons is that. And the other is that we like to work.” [Juan]

**Variant categories.** Seven variant categories emerged to describe experiences with work related to self-determination (see Table 2 for a complete listing). One of these included the recognition of their hard work and desire to gain respect as good workers. Graciela expressed, “Well the times that I won employee of the month, I thought to myself, well the hard work was worth it, that’s what made me feel good, the satisfaction of knowing they recognized my hard work.” Another felt that it was important to show employers that immigrants can succeed, commenting, “Well, because, I don’t know, if I couldn’t I would even feel humiliated, because the Americans would say, no the Mexicans they can’t do it!” [Carlos] Another variant category included participants’ views that work in the United States was a privilege. David explained that work was “A privileged obligation for us at which we shouldn’t fail at due to laziness.”

**Barriers to Work in the Midwest**

Barriers identifies a range of challenges Latino immigrants experience in seeking work, maintaining work, and advancing in their jobs in the Midwest. No general categories emerged from this domain; however, both English skills and work documents were typical barriers to working in the Midwest. In addition, six variant
categories were identified. See Table 2 for frequency of responses for each category.

**English skills.** Participants typically described English fluency as an impediment in working and indicated that not speaking English was the most important work barrier they encountered. Participants indicated that their lack of English skills affected communication with employers, opportunities for advancement, and the work they could do. Participants expressed that they could not share ideas with their employer that would lead to improved efficiency and productivity for the company, and that their employers could not take advantage of all of their skills because of language barriers. This barrier is highlighted in the following statements:

If I knew English they would be able to see this ability of mine. [Juan]

I couldn’t tell them that I knew how to use a computer. I didn’t have a way to communicate it to them. You understand? Because I didn’t know English. I never had the chance to tell them because I would always just clean the rooms when I got there and I was doing things that were really dirty so I wouldn’t get close to the office. [David]

The other time there was an opportunity to be a leader, but I didn’t get it because I don’t know how to speak English. [Eduardo]

**Proper documentation.** Participants also typically indicated that lack of proper documents made it difficult for them to work in the United States and generated fear of immigration officials. For example, “And here you want to go somewhere and you are scared. The same fear that all Mexicans have ... the immigration. You are scared and it sucks.” [Miguel] This fear prevents some participants from speaking out in the workplace because doing so may draw unwanted attention their way and could be used by co-workers to retaliate against them. The quote below reflects the variability in employers requiring these documents from workers and how lack of documents affects one participant’s earnings:

The manager wants me to work directly for the company. But, there is this thing called Social Security number that is asked of everyone who works. Not everybody because where I worked before, they didn’t ask for it. They said they didn’t care about any of that stuff, they just wanted workers. They keep asking me if I am going back to México. If I am planning to go back soon because they have plans for me and stuff like that. I think that is a barrier that I would have if they wanted to take me as part of the company because the pay is a lot better. I would do the same work. Everything would be the same. The only thing that would change is my salary. The company would pay me directly. [David]

**Variant categories.** The six variant barriers to work are listed in Table 2. Lack of reliable transportation was one variant work barrier. Participants did not have money to purchase a car or could not get a driver’s license to drive. In addition, they lived in communities where options for public transportation were not available or operated on limited schedules and routes. Miguel said, “Like over here, you need a car to get anywhere ... you can’t really do what you want [without a car].” Participants also identified being treated unfairly at work as a variant barrier to their optimal functioning and success. These participants perceived a hierarchy at work based on immigrant status, language skills, and/or job position. Pay disparities between native-born and foreign-born workers for doing the same work was a barrier to a few who worked in a factory. Laura said, “maybe they gave them preference because they’re in their own country, because they’re from the U.S.” Lack of information about the job market or job search process in the United States was identified as another variant barrier. Participants indicated that they did not receive information upon their arrival about requirements for some jobs or did not know how to locate information about jobs. This barrier is depicted as follows: “I didn’t imagine the type of work we were going to do. I didn’t even know what type [of] work there was here in the U.S.” [Miguel]

**Access to Work in the Midwest**

Access captures those resources that Latino immigrants utilize to connect to work opportunities in developing immigrant communities in the Midwest. Again, although no general category developed from the data, one typical (family support) and three variant categories were identified. Frequency counts for participant responses to categories are presented in Table 2.

**Family network.** The use of family networks in the United States was identified as a typical facilitator in locating jobs in the Midwest. For example,

My cousin told me that she knew someone that told her that they were looking for someone to work at that factory. And at that time I needed a job; I wasn’t working. I went and applied there and that’s how I found the job. [Laura]

I had a brother here and he helped me [find a job]. [Martin]

**Variant categories.** Other networks, community resources, and the media also were critical in helping participants locate work in new settlement communities. Other social networks included friends, former community members from their home country, and contracting networks, or job brokers who are contracted by the employer to look for workers. Javier indicated, “A friend referred us there.” A few participants utilized community resources such as employment offices to find work, and a few learned about employment openings through the newspaper or local radio.

**Discussion**

Vocational psychology has strayed from its original roots of working with poor, working class immigrants and has been criticized because its research does not reflect the diverse experiences of workers in the U.S. labor force (Blustein, 2008). The current discovery-oriented study presents data regarding the experiences in the world of work among a sample of Latino immigrants living in new settlement communities in the Midwest. Latinos have immigrated to the United States in search of work for several years, and sectors of the workforce have come to depend on their work. However, in spite of their presence and our reliance on their participation in the U.S. labor force, besides Shimmar’s (2007) study with Latino immigrant service workers in Las Vegas, this is one of the first work-related studies in counseling psychology that gives voice to Latino immigrant workers employed in a broad array of occupations.

Results of the current study provide an in-depth analysis of Latino immigrants’ experiences in the workforce. The findings also offer a rich, multifaceted understanding of Latino immigrants’
approach to work in the United States. The data suggest five prominent themes in describing their career development in the United States and provide important details about their work experiences: Work for survival and power, work for social connections, and work as self-determination reflect Blustein’s (2006) taxonomy for working, barriers to work in the Midwest, and access to work in the Midwest.

The findings of the current study present a complex and comprehensive depiction of Latino immigrant workers beliefs about work. These approaches to work include experiences in demanding and dangerous jobs and working to meet basic necessities. However, Latino immigrants’ perceptions of work also extend to viewing work as a means for familial advancement, personal development, and as a place to develop social support. Seven general aspects of work that were common to all (or all but one) of our participants were demanding and difficult aspects to jobs, working to improve the family’s status, working for basic needs, perceiving work as an opportunity to develop skills, wanting to advance at work, developing social networks through work, and exhibiting a strong work ethic as employees. Typical work experiences included both positive and negative interactions with co-workers and supervisors, concentrations of Latino workers at place of employment, work as a place to develop and practice spiritual support, liking work, work barriers related to language and work documents, and using family networks to locate jobs in the Midwest. Finally, a number of variant categories that described their work experiences emerged from the data, suggesting that participants hold varied perspectives of work.

The data indicated distinctive patterns in the world of work for these participants that were associated to their status as immigrants and that align with the psychology of working’s (Blustein, 2006) concept of work for survival and power. First, like other working class samples (Blustein et al., 2002; Chaves et al., 2004), our participants viewed work as a means to make money for basic living needs. Participants sought jobs that would provide living wages for their family, and they viewed work as an obligation to their families. Second, consistent with prior studies (Alderete et al., 1999; Perilla et al., 1998; Shinnar, 2007), our participants described poor working conditions that included working in jobs that were physically demanding, repetitive, and boring and work environments with high expectations for output, challenging physical conditions (e.g., hot, dusty, noisy), and high incidence of work-related injuries. These findings reflect the reality that immigrant workers represent a highly vulnerable work group who may not speak out against poor work conditions because of cultural norms, language barriers, fear of losing their jobs, or, for those who are not documented, fear of deportation. Nonetheless, researchers have noted that some employers view immigrant labor favorably because they can control the work conditions and not worry about employee complaints (Maldonado, 2006; Rodriguez, 2004).

In addition to these prominently addressed work experiences for survival, the data revealed a rich and complex relation with work among immigrants that broadens their work experiences to power and self-determination. Our participants viewed work as a means for personal and familial development and advancement. Thus, these participants used work not only to “get by” but also to “get ahead” in life. This was reflected in participants’ motives that work was a way to (a) promote the family’s prestige and status by improving their current living conditions; (b) obtain additional training or skills that would make them competitive for other jobs; (c) support future educational and career goals; and (d) pursue individual needs of recognition, achievement, interests, learning, and independence. Like Shinnar (2007), our participants wanted to develop and master new, advanced skills and improve English language fluency so that they can contribute in different ways to their employers. Although immigrants may be willing to perform entry-level jobs that require low-level skills and training, they want training to expand their skill sets. Without opportunities for professional development, these workers will have minimal chances to fulfill their needs for advancement, their earning power will be restricted, and options will be limited to the “brown collar” jobs.

Self-determination was further reflected in the data through participants’ strong work ethic and desire to work because they liked to work. Our participants possessed a strong orientation to work and expressed a great deal of pride in their work, providing some support for Boneva and Frieze’s (2001) belief that these intrinsic motivations are prevalent among immigrants. In addition, participants described the interrelation between work and relationships, supporting Blustein’s (2006, 2011) relational theory of working. Specifically, our findings suggest that Latino immigrants form relationships through work that provide opportunities for social networking and religious and spiritual connections. In addition, participants described a variety of both positive and negative interactions with co-workers and supervisors that shaped their experiences at work. Finally, meeting family role expectations within the family and fulfilling obligations to the family played a role in immigrant adults’ work activities. Prior research found that immigrants experience stress in managing multiple roles at home and work (e.g., Burgos, 2002; Dalla et al., 2006; Perreira et al., 2006). Given the importance of family in Latino culture, it is essential to understand the effects of work on the family dynamics in working class families, including immigrant families (Lambert, 1999).

In terms of work barriers and supports, our findings indicate that Latino immigrants do not experience any general barriers or supports to locating work in emerging immigrant communities. Language barriers and lack of work documents, which have been noted as barriers among other samples of Latino immigrants (e.g., Burgos, 2002; Perilla et al., 1998; Perreira et al., 2006; Shinnar, 2007), were identified as the most common barriers among our sample. In addition, our participants primarily utilized family networks to seek work similar to other studies (e.g., Fuentes, 2007; Garcia, 2005). These findings suggest that work is needed in developing immigrant communities in the Midwest to strengthen structures necessary to support immigrant newcomers and to reduce their barriers to work.

Implications for Counseling Psychology Practice

Our findings are important to counseling psychologists because the perceptions that Latino immigrants hold about work, the job search process, and their exposure to negative work conditions can impact their health (e.g., Finch et al., 2003). Following recommendations for counseling psychologists to act as social justice agents to remove institutional barriers (Vera & Speight, 2003), our results provide several directions for the development of interventions to help Latino immigrants’ reach their work goals. Several of these
recommendations require psychologists to work outside traditional practices and to develop relationships with employers (Flores et al., 2011).

In comparison to non-Latino immigrants, the wage earnings of Latino immigrants align to those of native born workers at slower rates (Borjas & Katz, 2005). Thus, the personal development of Latino immigrant workers in areas related to earnings can advance their work development and financial potential. One of these key determinants of immigrants’ occupational status and salary is educational attainment (Chiswick & Miller, 2002; Valdivia et al., 2008). Latino immigrants are less educated than their U.S.-born and non-Latino-immigrant counterparts (Borjas & Katz, 2005); therefore, this group may benefit from job training programs and other short-term training options that can prepare them for specific jobs. Our findings indicate that these workers seek opportunities for enhancing their work skills. Equipped with these skills, the search for jobs can be directed at specific positions rather than driven by the availability of jobs alone. Vocational psychologists should direct immigrant clients to resources for developing work skills, and can advocate on behalf of immigrant workers to make these training services accessible to workers. Intervention efforts should be directed toward job training programs and companies that employ high numbers of Latino immigrants. If job training programs and employers can provide support (e.g., pay for training, seek grants that offer vouchers for training, provide training on-site, providing transportation to training off-site, give time off from work for training) to workers who want to receive additional training, companies will benefit in the long run, as this provides a more skilled workforce. As we learned in our study, these participants are loyal and committed to their work and company and are likely to honor the company’s investment in their development as workers.

English language fluency is also associated with earnings among immigrants (Bean, Leach, & Lowell, 2004; Chiswick & Miller, 2002; Shields & Price, 2002; Valdivia et al., 2008). Thus, it is important that vocational psychologists seek solutions to the language barriers that Latino immigrants encounter. Many of our participants indicated that they wanted to learn English but were unable to take advantage of classes because of transportation barriers or busy work schedules. Psychologists can advocate for companies to provide supports for immigrants to enhance English skills. For example, employers can offer audio programs for learning English at home (i.e., CDs, CD players), or employers can offer English and Spanish language classes on-site before or after shifts or during lunch breaks for both Latino immigrants and supervisors/managers. Immigrant workers are more likely to work alongside workers from their own country (Andersson et al., 2010), and it is in the best interest of both the workers and the company’s productivity that all parties communicate effectively with one another. Supervisors and managers who knew basic Spanish were viewed favorably by participants in our study.

Using information gleaned from this study, vocational psychologists can educate employers that hire Latino immigrant workers and advocate on behalf of these workers’ rights and needs in the workplace. Contrary to commonly held stereotypes of Latinos as lazy (e.g., Niemann, 2001), participants consistently described themselves as hard workers and expressed a desire to advance at work and life in general. In addition, Latino workers want to be acknowledged for their hard work; if they are not currently doing so, employers should implement incentives in the workplace that reward the efforts of Latino immigrant workers. Vocational psychologists can also provide workshops for companies to enhance multicultural awareness, knowledge, and skills among all employees in the workplace. The work climate and productivity can improve for workers of all backgrounds by enforcing culturally sensitive practices and behaviors on the job. Finally, counseling psychologists must realize that this group is at risk for mental health concerns due to the negative work conditions they described, and their skills for coping with these work-related stressors should be assessed. Vocational psychologists could offer workshops for immigrant newcomers that orient them to customs, norms, and rules in the world of work in the United States; to educate them on their rights and responsibilities in the workplace as well as work policies related to sexual harassment and non-discrimination; and to address effective ways to cope with the work stressors that they face. To be most effective and to draw immigrants’ involvement and participation, these outreach efforts would ideally occur in their communities in consideration of possible transportation limitations, would be provided in both Spanish and English, and would be offered on different days and times to capitalize on workers’ availability. Vocational psychologists need to be cognizant of the issues that immigrants encounter related to immigration status, and they can work to remove institutional barriers by supporting policies that protect immigrant worker rights in the work environment.

Limitations and Future Research

All of the participants were drawn from two Midwest communities that are transitioning to the increasing numbers of Latino immigrants moving to the area. Future research should study the experiences of Latino immigrants in the workplace to replicate and extend these findings to samples in other emerging immigrant communities in the Midwest and in other regions of the country. In addition, our sample was primarily from Mexico. Other studies are needed to examine the work experiences of other Latino immigrant groups. Because our research team was composed of all women who were studying a group of mostly men, gendered experiences may have factored into the research process. Due to the potential for self-selection bias, these results may not be representative of other Latino immigrant workers. This study is based on one source of data—a single interview with participants. A second interview could have further increased participants’ comfort with the interview process, provided opportunities for participants to supplement their original responses, and verified researchers’ interpretations of participant responses from the earlier interview. Future research can be done where additional sources of data are obtained, such as work schedules or observations at work.

Additional avenues are available for future research with immigrant workers. More work is needed to understand differences in seeking work and workplace experiences across gender, age, nationality, and educational level groups, and future investigations can explore how the immigration experience affects immigrants’ relations with work post-immigration. In addition, qualitative research with children of immigrants could explore how their perceptions of work and future career goals are influenced by their parents’ work experiences. The validation of existing scales for use with immigrant workers is needed and can provide information on...
the necessity of the development of new instruments assessing work-related constructs. More studies are needed to understand immigrants’ perspectives on their work needs and the types of assistance they want, work selection and behavior, the role of various contextual factors (i.e., immigration status, family, immigration policies, regional setting) on immigrants’ vocational behaviors, predictors of job satisfaction among Latino immigrants, and the link between job satisfaction and immigrants’ mental health. Finally, future research should understand the work environment perspectives of others who work with immigrants in these work settings (e.g., co-workers, supervisors, employers) and explore how the context of reception within the larger community facilitates or impedes the career development of immigrants and their expectations of work.

Conclusion

The high rates of Latino immigration to the United States necessitates a broader understanding of work experiences among these workers across the spectrum—including both professional and working class employees. Our data focus these newcomers’ experiences in locating work and maintaining employment and highlight salient themes that characterize their work experiences in two Midwest communities. Some our findings pertaining to work for survival are consistent with prior research on the work experiences of immigrants, whereas others extend the extant literature by offering an expanded perspective of the functions of work among immigrants to include relational aspects of working, work for self-determination, and work for power. Our findings indicate that our sample of Latino immigrants in the Midwest pursued work for financial rewards in addition to social, cultural, and intrinsic outcomes. This study provides a richer understanding of their experiences as members of the labor force, and we hope that others pursue similar lines of inquiry with labor immigrants and other marginalized workers.

References


LATINO IMMIGRANTS AND WORK


