


Educating Immigrant Women Through Social Support

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Abstract

The purpose of this case study was to describe a single multicultural women's support program known as the Women of Care Project. The program was conducted in a community in the Midwest region of the United States and began in 2005 with a grant from the Open Meadows Foundation. Participants were volunteers who were recruited for the program through pre-existing access points to the Bosnian, African, and Hispanic communities, such as ethnic churches, markets, and key contacts within these communities. The support group format for the Women of Care Program was an open group format in which participants were encouraged to invite their friends to join. The initial support group consisted of women from various cultural origins, including Ghana, Rwanda, Tanzania, Russia, Sierra Leone, Brazil, China, Taiwan, India, Nepal, Bosnia, Mexico, and the United States. This case study was based on focus group discussions, as well as observations and completion of evaluation forms. To analyze data, the focus group discussion notes and summaries were rearranged into recurring themes. The evaluation provided further feedback from the discussions to cement these themes. Findings suggested immigrants, especially women, benefit from support groups. Group involvement could empower women and increase their general sense of well-being in overcoming barriers they may face in transitioning into a new environment. It is recommended that host communities have integration programs which benefit both the host community and the immigrant: a win-win situation.

Keywords

immigrant women, culture, support, multicultural

Introduction

For centuries, the United States has opened its doors to immigrants from many parts of the world, and the past two decades have marked one of the most significant periods in immigration history (Davies, 2008). Despite its long immigrant history, the United States has no formal immigrant integration policy (M. M. Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Sattin-Bajaj, 2010). Immigrant arrivals a century ago were overwhelmingly European whereas today's immigrants come primarily from Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America (Lobo, Salvo, & Virgin, 1996; Migration Policy Institute, 2002). Groups which had little immigrant representation in the late 1980s, such as Mexicans and West Africans, have become a much more significant presence in recent years (Corra & Kimuna, 2009; Foner, 2009).

In the 1980s and 1990s, during the great wave of immigration, male immigrants outnumbered female immigrants; however, the majority of immigrants to the United States today are women (Houstoun, Kramer, & Barrett, 1984; Zlotnik, 2003). Although some of these women immigrated on their own, most others enter the United States relying on their marriage to a man who is a citizen of the United States

or a legal permanent resident (Martin, 2004; Narayan, 1995). Immigrant women who arrive from non-Western cultures are likely to face numerous challenges related to migration, unrealistic expectations, lack of language skills, and being forced to cope with cultural differences (Carr, Koyama, & Thiagarajan, 2003; Williams, 2011). This article will examine these challenges and how a social support group helped to assist these women and alleviate some of the issues, stresses, and concerns facing them. In the end, "immigration . . . is about human beings" (M. M. Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010, p. 535) and how they adapt to their new communities.

The Women of Care Program was able to sustain its funding through grants from several organizations, such as the Open Meadows Foundation, in-kind donations from local

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churches as well as monetary donations from various organizations and churches throughout the state. Evaluation tools for this program included focus groups, observations, feedback elicited from the participants, and completion of evaluation forms.

Expectations

Upon arrival in the United States, immigrant women face a reality that is different from their expectations, which tends to cause emotional distress (Williams, 2011). For many immigrant women, especially those from non-Western cultures, their expectations are based on Hollywood movies and books in which women are portrayed as being successful, glamorous, and independent. These assumptions can become a stumbling block, hindering many immigrant women from adapting to their new lifestyle or coping with the reality of women's roles in their new culture. "The mingling of reality and aspiration can become problematic" (Sabates-Wheeler, Taylor, & Natali, 2009, p. 753), as it leads women to base their search for a better life on imaginary aspirations. For married immigrant women with husbands who still believe that a woman's place is in the kitchen, the differences between both cultures create a stumbling block. As women become "less fatalistic, less submissive, and more authoritarian in the home" (Zarrugh, 1974, cited in Salgado de Snyder, 1987, p. 476), they challenge the role of men which often strikes at the core of their self-esteem (Darvishpour, 2002; Shirkpak, Tyndale, & Chinichian, 2011) making it impossible for a peaceful marriage.

Language

The ability to navigate within a new environment requires a working knowledge of the primary language spoken by the host country. Female immigrants are more likely than men to face the harsh reality of trying to survive without a working knowledge of the host language (Batalova & Fix, 2010; Hyman & Dussault, 1996). In their role as mothers, women are required to function and interact publicly in places such as "stores, schools, and the workplace" (Hondagneu-Sotelo cited in King & De Fina, 2010, p. 654). In these environments, a woman's lack of language proficiency may limit her ability to communicate effectively, which may restrict her access to public life and community services. A lack of ability to communicate with school staff, for example, may make it difficult for these women to adequately participate in their children's educational experiences (Batalova & Fix, 2010).

In addition, language deficiencies prevent many immigrant women from "interacting with American-born neighbors, engaging in civic life, and becoming integrated into their new community" (Chenoweth, 2006, p. 185), leading to a lack of knowledge of the social safety net—health care, housing, and welfare services. Deficiency in language skills also inhibits mobility and serves as a barrier to identifying

occupations that are "safe to pursue" and often prevent female immigrants from "securing a well-paying job in which English is an essential tool for communication" (Ma & Yeh, 2010, p. 232). With limited language skills affecting employment opportunities for immigrant women, researchers believe that "immigration and unemployment create three sources of stressors: uncertainty about the future (Atkinson et al., 1986; Shalit, 1977), financial and emotional distress due to the lack of a job (Jacobson, 1986), and exclusion from main-stream society (Muller, 1993)" as cited in Lev-Wiesel and Kaufman (2004, p. 60).

Culture

According to Norman (2015), raising children in a new environment presents unique challenges. On a daily basis, women are confronted with monitoring their children's schoolwork, maintaining family traditions, and balancing family dynamics. For instance, when parents are confronted with the manner children speak to adults, the opposing cultural values can create an outcome which can be disheartening to the parents. While immigrant parents' expectations, norms, rules, and beliefs about child rearing, family roles, and obligations tend to remain stable, children's attitudes can change greatly over time (Xiong, Eliason, Detzner, & Cleveland, 2005).

In comparison with many cultures, the United States tends to be a more permissive society, allowing children a degree of autonomy to which many immigrants may not be accustomed (Parsai, Nieri, & Villar, 2010). For most immigrant mothers, training these children becomes a Herculean task as they strive to keep their children within the bounds of what they deem to be correct principles. Conflicts arise because children who live in this new society have usually gained a new perspective on life (Daglar, Melhuish, & Barnes, 2011; Parsai et al., 2010). More specifically, the children's outlook on life is reflected in what they wear, how they speak, and even what they eat (Yao, 1985). For example, they may wear clothing considered to be inappropriate by the standards maintained by the parent and may begin to speak in ways which are difficult to understand or are considered rude within their previous culture (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Yao, 1985).

Having interacted with and been exposed to their peers, the children may develop a taste for American dishes and request that their parents provide such meals (Yao, 1985). As many immigrant families have limited finances (Batalova & Fix, 2010), providing two different meals designed to satisfy the newly acquired tastes of their children may strain the family budget and fray the parents' nerves. In essence, immigrant home life can become a stressful place in which diverging groups of people try to accommodate one another.

The resulting stress from emotional, social, cultural, educational, and economic adjustments may prompt immigrant women to gravitate toward social support groups (Kazemipur, 2006). Social support systems can validate the experiences

of immigrant women and provide powerful coping resources (Carr et al., 2003). As opposed to many individual friendships, a support group can serve to help its members generate an increased number of solutions and ideas which provide women with a variety of choices for dealing with their problems. According to Cho and Haslam (2010), social support is particularly important to serve as a buffer against distress. Relationships formed in support groups serve a critical function in maintaining and enhancing self-esteem, while providing acceptance, approval, and a sense of belonging (C. Suárez-Orozco & Carhill, 2008). These relationships can serve as replacements for families far away as well as a way of maintaining cultures left behind (Bilge, 2012).

Method

The purpose of this case study was to describe a single multicultural women's support program known as the Women of Care Project. The following research questions guided the study:

Research Question 1: What steps were taken to develop this multicultural women's support program?

Research Question 2: What were the activities of this multicultural women's support program?

Research Question 3: What benefits did the women derive from participating in the multicultural program?

Setting

The program was located in a community in the Midwest region of the United States. The community where the program was housed had been experiencing some of the most significant demographic changes in the United States during the past decade (Grey, 2006). According to Grey (2006), this particular state had one of the largest percentages of aging residents in the country with 370,000 people retiring over the next decade as well as a decreasing birthrate. Also, half of this state's college and university graduates leave the state resulting in a large out-migration of the young workforce. To bridge this gap, and to ensure the future economic and social viability of the state, meatpacking and other industries in the participating community and throughout the state actively recruit refugees and immigrants from Latin America, Eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa (Grey, 2006). Recent trends in immigration in this Midwestern state also show an increase in secondary migration of Burmese refugees (Molseed, 2011). These refugees have become attracted to the area because of the abundance of readily available jobs, particularly in the meatpacking industry.

Some industrial cities have worked with the U.S. State Department to help bring refugees to their cities from refugee camps across the nation (Molseed, 2011). These new immigrant and refugee populations face many serious problems and obstacles that impede their successful integration

into their new environments. As a result, the Women of Care Program and other similar programs were developed.

Data Collection and Analysis

The current study was a case study of a women immigrants and refugees support group. Creswell (2007) mentioned different methods of data collection for case studies. Based on Creswell's recommendations, this case study used focus group discussions, observations, and completion of evaluation forms collected after each monthly activity for a period of 1 year (see Appendix B).

Speakers were invited to facilitate each event. Each event was led by the program founder (African descent), Spanish translator (Mexican descent), and Bosnian translator (Bosnian descent). In addition, there were two women from a local university who were interns working in the program (Caucasian and Indian descent). The Spanish and Bosnian translators helped with the issue of language during the focus discussions. At the end of each event, an evaluation form was given to evaluate the effectiveness of the program (see Appendix A).

To analyze the data, the focus group discussion notes and summaries were rearranged into the recurring themes (Creswell, 2007). The evaluations provided further feedback from the discussions to cement these themes.

Participants

"The Women of Care Project" was a monthly, year-long program designed to benefit immigrant and refugee women new to a community located in the Midwest region of the United States while offering longtime residents the unprecedented opportunity to meet and better understand these newcomers and their cultures. The project was built upon a support/educational group concept, providing a support network while helping immigrant women integrate and adapt to their new surroundings. The network also provided avenues for developing language skills and expanding educational and employment opportunities, empowering these women to become productive members of their communities.

Participants were recruited for the program through pre-existing access points to the Bosnian, African, and Hispanic communities, such as ethnic churches, markets, and key contacts within these communities. All participants in the study agreed to participate and consent forms were signed by each individual to denote their informed consent. An average of 15 women attended the meetings; however, some activities attracted more than 15 women from the community. For example, the International Tea Party, a scheduled event that showcased different types of tea, attracted more than 100 women from the community. This gala event provided women an opportunity to meet, greet, and converse with other women while also sampling various brews of tea from around the world.

The program started with women from different cultural backgrounds, including Ghana, Rwanda, Tanzania, Russia, Sierra Leone, Brazil, China, Taiwan, India, Nepal, Bosnia, Mexico, and the United States. To ameliorate the high levels of stress and depression among these women, the program used methods to reduce stress and depression which were different from traditional Western approaches. Because these women often reported feeling detached from the community due to cultural differences, unfulfilled expectations, lack of trust in the traditional health care system, and language barriers, several activities were provided to address their challenges in a holistic way.

Program Description

The first procedure conducted in the study involved participants being matched with a local volunteer who acted as a conversational partner/friend. The purpose of this individual interaction was twofold: It allowed the newcomer to practice and develop her English skills in a non-threatening environment, and it provided the women with someone who could assist them with their individual needs. Also, in the beginning months of the program, the agency held a “Welcome to Our Community” series of activities, including a tour of the area. This series allowed the women to become more familiar with the community in a secure group setting while allowing them to become aware of area resources and other agencies in the community.

In the second procedure, staff and translators conducted home visits to the women’s homes. Home visits tend to be especially important among the immigrant and refugee population who oftentimes have no means of transportation and typically lack familiarity with telephone and written communication styles in Western countries. Most of the women in the current study came from communities where face-to-face communication was considered to be a valued means for addressing serious matters.

Third, the women met collectively as a group once each month. This group interaction enabled the women to create new social connections with other women who were experiencing similar circumstances and experiences, which also served to help the women combat their feelings of isolation. Most of these women came from cultures where most activities were done in a group with extended families, friends, village elders, religious leaders, and/or the general community. Women were provided with opportunities to share their stories, encourage each other, meet new friends, make connections, improve/learn new skills, and gain a sense of belonging to the community. Through these collective group meetings, the women were afforded an opportunity to learn and share with each other culturally sensitive and relevant ways to manage their feelings of stress and depression.

Program Activities

The main activities of the group included cooking, dancing, conducting presentations, and offering social support. In the

first year of the program, meetings were held biweekly with one meeting each month being led by one of the women from the group who showcased a recipe from her home country. She also led the group in a demonstration of how to prepare and cook the dish. The social group activities were open to general members of the community. These social group activities enabled the women to share their culture, build their confidence, and enhance their feelings of self-worth.

The other meeting in the month focused on traditional health practices, which included, but were not limited to, natural medicines, food preparation practices, child-rearing strategies, and taboos. An end result of the first year of the program was that the women collectively put together a cookbook. This cookbook was essentially a collection of recipes from women in the program and others from the community.

In 2007, the Women of Care Program hosted an International Tea Party sponsored by the local branch of the American Association of University Women. One hundred people attended this event—immigrant/refugee women and community members. Women from various cultures wore their native clothing and shared their tea time customs with the community members. Also, a member of the community shared her collection of teapots, described the history of tea, and exposed the group to various types of tea.

Findings/Results

The women reported several benefits through participating in this support group program. A number of the participants reported that the program helped them develop better mental and emotional wellness, as well as a general sense of well-being for themselves, their children, and extended family members. The support groups also helped these women overcome some of the barriers they faced in the areas of language, culture, poverty, and discrimination, issues which made it very difficult for them to function competently in a new community. In addition, the support groups created a place where the participants connected with people with similar experiences. This sharing format helped to alleviate some of the pain and difficulties associated with the acculturation process.

The participants made friends quickly and created a support system they could rely on for strength. Sharing traditions and different food ideas were empowering to the women because they felt their contribution to this new social environment was valuable to others. It also afforded local residents a unique opportunity to learn about women from other cultures. Newcomers and members of the host community even shared their knowledge of job opportunities and agreed to serve as references for each other. To date, many of the participants still share their joys with each other, including sharing news about birthdays, graduations, newborns, weddings, anniversaries, and vacations.

Discussion

The purpose of this case study was to describe a single multicultural women's support group program known as the Women of Care Project. Regarding the questions posed by the study, (a) the women who participated in the study were a diverse group of immigrant women who shared their cultures with one another, members of the community, and the staff from the program to define their uniqueness and find support from one another and the project leaders, the directors of the program advertised the program in the community to solicit participants and set up scheduled meetings as well as guided activities for the participants; (b) the program provided numerous activities such as cooking sessions, tea socials, stress management sessions, and many others (see Appendix B); and (c) the program provided opportunities for the women to develop a sense of belonging and experienced enhanced self-worth and self-esteem through their participation in the program.

Assisting immigrant newcomers in making adjustments, finding employment, and in coping with a new cultural context has been suggested in previous research (Lev-Wiesel & Kaufman, 2004). There is a need to foster the development of social support groups that assist new immigrants in an attempt to broaden the social ties of the immigrants with the demands of their new environment. It is recommended that policy makers and service providers develop programs for this specific population. Development of support groups and social networks will enable these immigrant women to acquire skills needed to help them better interact with the community as they try to cope with the adversity presented to them in their new culture as well as serve to empower them in the process. Programs are needed that empower women and teach them techniques and strategies in adopting an active rather than a passive role in the adaptation process. Therefore, programs should be created to facilitate the process of helping these women make the necessary adjustments for adapting to the host community.

Future research should focus on helping immigrant women adapt to change and how society can create a supportive environment to facilitate their success. Group interaction is an integral part of the process and provides a vital means of furthering identity development and social support

for immigrant women. Being able to share their experiences with others is both significant and helpful. Interaction with other women and sharing experiences can serve as a foundation to their success and can provide a unique set of cross-cultural learning experiences. More importantly, female leaders from other ethnicities may serve as positive role models for immigrant women in assisting their acculturation experiences and provide a support system through social engagement.

In addition, a follow-up study should be conducted to investigate how these women are continuing to adapt, what are their current challenges now, and how they are integrating into the society. Such a study should focus on these women's daily routines, experiences, and reflections of their lives in the United States.

Conclusion

The women in this study benefited from the activities and networking provided through participating in this program. The skills, resources, and networking provided through their participation in the program increased the likelihood of succeeding and better integrating into their new environment. The sense of sharing and contributing to other women in the group created a sense of belonging and empowerment as indicated by their feedback.

As the number of immigrant women continues to grow (Migration Policy Institute, 2002), it would be beneficial for local communities to create programs to help women and their families integrate into American culture. Based on the experiences of the women in the Women of Care Program, it is suggested that social support validated the experiences of women and provided a powerful coping resource for those who were dealing with stressful life changes (Carr et al., 2003). It is recommended that integration programs for new immigrants be implemented. Faith-based organizations and educational institutions which have a large population of international students as well as other well-meaning individuals should collaborate to implement similar programs. Individuals who conduct these programs should be culturally aware of the diversity that exists among immigrants. Better integration benefits the host community and the immigrant, which is a win-win situation for everyone involved.

Appendix A

Evaluation Form—Women of Care Program

Event: Title: Date:

Location:

What is your occupation? _____ Ethnicity _____
Gender F M Age _____

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements about today's session.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Today's event was helpful	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The presenter(s) did a great job	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The topic was clear and easy to understand	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
There was adequate time for questions and answers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

In general, please let us know the level of satisfaction of today's event by marking the correspondent happy or sad faces.

 Fully Satisfied
  Satisfied
  Indifferent
  Unsatisfied
  Extremely Unsatisfied
  Did not use

Please share with us what you enjoyed the most about today's event.

Please add any other additional comments or questions about today's event, or suggestions you might have for further session.

Thank You Very Much

Appendix B

Timeline: Women of Care Program

January: Recruitment	A. Advertisement: Newspaper, TV, speaking, website B. Organize space, speakers
February: Introduction	A. Introduction: Participants, program details, program preferences, barriers B. Prioritize need: Asses knowledge and stress levels
March: Workshop	A. Self-care/relaxation techniques: Speaker—message therapist Relaxation techniques, health care systems/social services information. B. Introduction: Complexity of unfamiliar U.S. health care system.
April: Workshop	A. Health care systems and social services B. Fieldtrip
May: Workshop	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • U.S. Welfare system, do's and don'ts/cultural expectations • Cultural expectations, similarities, and differences
June: Workshop	A. Fieldtrip: Park or museum B. Financial education: Managing finances, credit
July: Workshop	A. Financial education, predatory lending; home, automobile B. Financial education Employment: Work ethics, resume building Explore employment options based on individual capability
August: Workshop	A. Employment options: Panel discussion—employees Open opportunities for immigrants/challenges B. Fieldtrip: Local company Nursing home
September: Skills Sharing & Development	A. Cooking: Multicultural food preparation Cooking event advertised for community attendance B. "Evening of Exchange" Dinner: Open to community

(continued)

Appendix B (continued)

	A. Cooking skills: Recipe sharing and dishes Participants teach others ethnic dishes and culture
	B. Recipe sharing
November: Empowerment	A. Recipe sharing B. Arts: Fieldtrip to local painting shop
December: Empowerment	A. Session evaluation, discussion, program recommendations B. Evaluation/discussion/recommendations
Celebration:	Final gathering of women, families, and supporters to celebrate end of program Testimonials: How program made a difference in their lives Intention to recruit supporters for future programs

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