

Psychological Homelessness and Enculturative Stress among US-Deported Salvadorans: A Preliminary Study with a Novel Approach

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Abstract The purpose of this study was to examine the construct *psychological homelessness*—feelings of not belonging in one’s home country—within the context of deported Salvadorans’ enculturation to El Salvador. Participants ($n = 66$) who had been deported from the United States completed a set of questionnaires related to their deportation experience. Results indicated that deportees, in various degrees, experienced the phenomenon of psychological homelessness and enculturative stress related to living in El Salvador. As hypothesized, enculturative stress related to re-adapting to life in El Salvador significantly correlated with psychological homelessness after controlling for time spent in the United States, acculturation, and enculturation. Additional analyses revealed that maladaptive cognitions related to the deportation experience also predicted psychological homelessness. Our findings suggest psychological homelessness appears to be a valid construct and is experienced by many undocumented immigrants.

Keywords Undocumented immigrants · Psychological homelessness · Enculturative stress · Maladaptive cognitions

Introduction

A construct that has been the focus of attention among minority members is marginalization. Marginalization refers to individuals being pushed to the margins within a community and made to feel as if they do not form part of the larger group [1]. Castillo and others e.g. [2, 3] have found that US Latino college students report feeling marginalized by family members and other Latinos in their home communities because of their nonconformity to traditional Latino values and by not speaking Spanish. Moreover, marginalization of US Latino college students by other Latinos has been found to correlate positively with acculturation toward US culture and acculturative stress [3], and negatively with enculturation toward traditional Latino cultural values [2].

A construct relatively ignored within the social sciences is that of *psychological homelessness*. A search in social and health science data bases revealed no study that has investigated this construct. Within the field of psychology, psychological homelessness has been used anecdotally to refer to cognitions and emotions individuals have when they perceive they are not part of their own community or country. Gaines and Reed [4] alluded to this phenomenon in their description of African Americans’ personality development. Despite being born in the US, many African Americans perceive that they are not fully accepted by White Americans who treat African Americans as outsiders. Psychological homelessness theoretically encompasses an array of feelings such as discomfort, detachment, and

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subjectively not feeling “at home” in one’s own community or country.

Psychological homelessness is similar to the construct of marginalization in that they both can entail individuals subjectively experiencing being devalued or unwanted within their own community. However, we propose that they are distinct in that marginalization implies the commission of behaviors by others to push individuals to the margins of a community. By contrast, psychological homelessness theoretically reflects internally generated feelings of not belonging or not fitting in with one’s own group that may not stem from external rejection necessarily. In theory, individuals can be marginalized by others yet not experience subjective feelings of not belonging. For example, Latinos in the US can be marginalized by the larger, dominant group (Whites), yet may be unaffected psychologically by means of insulating themselves in Latino enclaves. By the same token, marginalization may be absent, yet for various reasons, individuals can still feel they do not belong with either their own or with a larger group, and thus feel psychologically homeless.

Moreover, irrespective of whether marginalization is occurring, we theorize that psychological homelessness also involves a component of identification—specifically, a lack of identification with others or a location. In the context of our study, independent of possible marginalization emanating from other Salvadorans, deportees may simply no longer identify with other Salvadorans or with El Salvador as a country. Thus, in this study, we deemed psychological homelessness to be more appropriate as a construct of study than marginalization given this study’s focus on deported Salvadorans transitioning to life in their country of origin. Not feeling at home in their native country, yet having been removed by the country they likely consider to be home (the US), theoretically and logically ought to cause deported Salvadorans to experience subjectively what we characterize as psychological homelessness.

The Case of Salvadorans

El Salvador is a country with 6.2 million inhabitants [5]. Large numbers of Salvadorans had fled El Salvador due to the civil war that began in 1980 and lasted until 1992. Since then, both documented and undocumented Salvadorans have entered the US, resulting in 1.6 million Salvadorans currently residing throughout the US [5]. Salvadorans constitute part of the social fabric of the US in that almost every major city is home to relatively large numbers of Salvadorans [6].

In recent years, El Salvador has received tens of thousands of Salvadorans who have been deported. In 2010 alone, 18,735 Salvadorans were deported just from the US,

with the majority (60 %) having no record of criminality [7]. Very few studies exist about undocumented immigrants and as a result, little is known about how they fare subsequent to deportation. Further, many deported immigrants eventually re-immigrate to the US [8]. It can be expected that a portion of Salvadoran deportees will return to the US for economic reasons and to reunite with family members.

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

This study was guided by acculturative stress theory [9], theories related to the importance of belonging to a social group [10, 11], and cognitive theory of maladjustment [12]. Acculturative stress theory posits that individuals will experience distress when they perceive social pressures to conform to community norms as aversive or coercive [13]. Enculturative stress is the converse of acculturative stress [2, 3, 13] and occurs in response to real or perceived pressures from members of one’s own cultural group to, in the case of Salvadorans repatriated to El Salvador, retain Spanish and practices associated with conventional Salvadoran culture. Theories on the importance of belonging to a social group suggest that humans have innate psycho-emotional needs to subjectively experience themselves as members of one or more social groups external to their own existence. Psychological homelessness theoretically represents an interfacing of feelings of not belonging as a potential consequence of enculturative stress whereby, in the context of this study, deported Salvadorans might experience a disconnect between their sense of belonging vis-à-vis their national identity. Stated differently, subtle or direct communications by others conveying their disapproval for behaviors or values that are at odds with local, community norms often create stress in those targeted by such messages. This form of enculturative stress may tap into deportees’ pre-existing sentiments of detachment to their country of origin and thus exacerbate feelings of psychological homelessness. Further and in all likelihood, psychological homelessness is a product of a confluence of variables. Negative and maladaptive cognitions also theoretically underlie the phenomenon of psychological homelessness. Maladaptive thoughts related to deportation likely are linked with deportees’ sense of psychological homelessness.

The Current Study

In this study, we examined the link between enculturative stress and psychological homelessness. After having lived in the US, some Salvadorans may struggle to identify with the country they had chosen to leave. Countries are dynamic and change with time; what once was their home may no longer

be experienced as such. Also, friendships may wane along with previous family ties. In the case of immigrants, often they re-encounter specific problems from which they had fled, such as poor job prospects, inadequate housing, and so on. Also, residents may view deportees with suspicion and treat them as “outsiders” given the stigma attached to deported immigrants as being criminals [7]. It is reasonable to expect that deported Salvadorans may experience various degrees of psychological homelessness.

Moreover, compulsory deportation can be highly stressful and trigger negative psychological reactions [14, 15]. We believe such reactions may include attributes consistent with our conceptualization of psychological homelessness. Thus, we also included measures of maladaptive cognitions to determine if non-constructive cognitions related to deportation would be linked to psychological homelessness.

Consistent with theories on acculturative and enculturative stress, we hypothesized that enculturative stress would positively correlate with psychological homelessness. Although not formally hypothesized, we also expected that maladaptive cognitions related to participants’ deportation experience would be related to psychological homelessness given the influence maladaptive cognitions can have on other psychoemotional attitudes across contexts.

Methods

Participants

The sample included 66 Salvadorans (63 men; 3 women) who had been deported from the United States to El Salvador. Their ages varied from 19 to 66 years ($M = 38.39$; $SD = 10.87$) and on average, they had 9.53 years of education ($SD = 3.62$). The age when they had immigrated to the United States varied from 5 to 49 years ($M = 23.38$; $SD = 9.69$), and the length of time they had lived in the United States varied from 1 month to 44 years ($M = 13.01$ years; $SD = 10.50$ years). The length of time they had resided in El Salvador post-deportation varied from 1 month to 14.33 years ($M = 1.23$ years; $SD = 2.47$ years). Table 1 shows additional descriptive information.

Data Collection

Participants were recruited at the Immigration Center in San Salvador, El Salvador where they had been processed at the time of arrival from the US. Through a government-operated repatriation program (“Programa de Atención a los Migrantes Salvadoreños”), a component of the Center offers services to deported Salvadorans that include limited assistance with employment, job-skills training, and

Table 1 Descriptive information about participants ($n = 66$)

Description	Frequency (out of 66)	Percentage (%)
Married or cohabitating	30	45.4
Left spouses/partners in US	14	47.0
Had one or more children	45	66.2
Had at least one child in the US	23	51.1
Had at least one child in El Salvador	23	51.1
Catholic or other type of Christian	51	89.7
Had immigrated to US more than once	19	25.44
Immigrated for economic reasons	43	64.2
Immigrated to join family	10	14.9
Employed in US at time of deportation	52	77.6
Employed in El Salvador at time of study	0	0
Deportation due to DUI	24	36.4
Plans to attempt immigration to US again	37	55.2

medical and psychological services. Whenever deportees returned to the Center requesting services (subsequent to having been processed), the principal researcher of this study invited them to voluntarily complete a set of questionnaires related to their deportation experience. They received \$5.00 compensation for having completed the 30–45 min questionnaire. All questionnaires had been translated into Spanish using the Brislin [16] technique. Although the questionnaires were available in English and Spanish, all participants elected to complete the questionnaires in Spanish. The principal researcher was available at all times to clarify items for them if necessary. This study was reviewed and approved by the principal author’s institutional review board prior to data collection.

Measures

Participants completed the following instruments.

Demographic Sheet

In addition to assessing routine demographic information about participants (e.g., age, gender, education level, etc.), this sheet assessed information related to their deportation experiences. Examples include, but are not limited to: age when immigrated, age when deported, years having lived in the United States, family status pre- and post-deportation, and employment status.

Psychological Homelessness

The Psychological Homelessness Scale (PHS) [17] was designed for this study and measures the extent to which respondents do not feel they belong or are accepted by

others in El Salvador. It contained ten items to which respondents indicated their level of agreement using a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Four items are reverse-scored. Responses to items were averaged to obtain a total score; thus scores range from 1 to 5, with higher scores representing higher levels of “psychological homelessness”. An example of an item is: “I feel like I no longer belong here in El Salvador” (Appendix shows all items in English and Spanish). Although no validity data external to the current study are available to support the PHS, various correlations between PHS scores and other study variables offer preliminary support for its construct validity. For example, participants’ PHS scores correlated positively with acculturation toward the US culture ($r = .47$) and negatively with enculturation toward the Salvadoran culture ($r = -.51$). Based on the current sample of participants, the PHS obtained a reliability estimate (Cronbach α) of .75.

Enculturative Stress

To assess the extent to which participants experienced stress related to pressure from family and friends to conform to Salvadoran customs, we created 6 items that were guided by the Multidimensional Acculturative Stress Inventory (MASI) [13]. Specifically, items from the MASI’s acculturative and enculturative stress subscales served as models to create a scale contextually appropriate for this study in El Salvador. Items are responded to using a 5-point Likert-type scale; response options range from 1 (not at all stressful) to 5 (extremely stressful). An example of an item is, “I am bothered when people pressure me to assimilate to Salvadoran ways of doing things”. Responses to items are averaged; thus, scores range from 1 to 5, with higher scores reflecting higher enculturative stress. Based on the current sample of participants, this scale obtained a reliability estimate (Cronbach α) of .93.

Acculturation and Enculturation

To assess participants’ levels of acculturation to the US culture and enculturation to Salvadoran culture, they completed a modified version of the Stephenson Multi-group Acculturation Scale (SMAS) [18]. The 32 items are responded to using a 4-point Likert-type scale; response options range from 1 (false) to 4 (true). The SMAS yields scores on two subscales: The dominant-society immersion subscale (i.e., acculturation), and the ethnic-society immersion subscale (i.e., enculturation). The SMAS was modified by replacing the phrase “country of origin” with “El Salvador” for the ethnic-society immersion items. Responses to subscale items are averaged; thus, scores range from 1 to 4, with higher scores reflecting higher

acculturation toward either the US or El Salvador, respectively. Based on the current sample of participants, the SMAS obtained reliability estimates (Cronbach α) of .70 (acculturation toward the US) and .75 (enculturation toward El Salvador), respectively.

Maladaptive Cognitions

To assess maladaptive cognitions related to deportation and the immigrants’ current living situation, they completed the Post-Traumatic Cognitions Inventory (PTCI) [19]. The PTCI is a 36-item inventory designed to assess individuals’ thoughts following a traumatic event that fall into three categories: (a) negative cognitions about self; (b) negative cognitions about the world; and (c) self-blame for the traumatic event. Participants were instructed to respond to the items in reference to their deportation. Items are responded to using a 7-point Likert-type scale with response options ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 7 (totally agree). Responses to subscale items are averaged; thus scores range from 1 to 7, with higher scores reflecting more negative thoughts or blame. Based on the current sample of participants, the PTCI obtained reliability estimates (Cronbach α) of .88 (negative cognitions about self), .80 (negative cognitions about the world), and .73 (self-blame), respectively.

Analyses

To test the study hypothesis, a zero-order and partial correlation were performed to assess associations between enculturative stress and psychological homelessness. We also performed a multiple regression to predict psychological homelessness from the three types of maladaptive cognitions (negative cognitions about self, negative cognitions about the world, and self-blame for the traumatic event).

Results

The participants’ obtained ranges, means, and standard deviations on study variables are shown in Table 2. As hypothesized, enculturative stress correlated significantly with psychological homelessness ($r = .47$, $p < .001$). After controlling for time spent in the US, acculturation toward the US culture, and enculturation toward Salvadoran culture, enculturative stress continued to correlate significantly with psychological homelessness ($r = .28$, $p < .05$).

As expected, maladaptive cognitions significantly predicted psychological homelessness (*Multiple R*² = .29,

Table 2 Ranges, means, and standard deviations on study variables ($N = 66$)

Variable	Range	Mean	SD
Psychological homelessness ^a	1.63–5.00	3.13	.77
Enculturative stress ^b	1.00–5.00	2.15	1.15
Acculturation ^c	1.19–5.00	2.70	.67
Enculturation ^c	1.94–4.00	3.62	.36
Negative cog. about self ^d	1.10–5.57	2.68	1.06
Negative cog. about world ^d	1.86–7.00	4.69	1.31
Self-blame ^d	1.00–7.00	3.72	1.40

^a Psychological homelessness measured by the PHS

^b Enculturative stress measured by the modified MASI

^c Acculturation and enculturation measured by the modified SMAS

^d Maladaptive cognitions measured by the PTCI

$F[3, 62] = 8.41, p < .001$). The two predictor variables that achieved significance were negative cognitions about the self ($\beta = .539, t = 3.95, p < .001$), and negative cognitions about the world ($\beta = .309, t = 2.42, p < .05$).

Discussion

As hypothesized, enculturative stress was associated positively with psychological homelessness. The more repatriated Salvadorans experienced pressure from local Salvadorans to conform to conventional Salvadoran norms, the more they felt out of place in their home country. These findings suggest that immigrants who migrate to a new country (e.g., the US) may internalize in non-superficial ways the norms of the host country. Such internalization of host-country norms may be sufficiently enduring to the point where deported immigrants no longer identify with or feel at home in their country of origin. Such sentiments may be exacerbated when fellow-residents communicate expectations of conformity.

Psychological homelessness may entail a range of painful cognitions and emotions such as feelings of not belonging, being unwanted, and possibly self-deprecating thoughts. The subjective experience of psychological homelessness, as Gaines and Reed [4] suggested, generates a crisis of identity. This crisis stems from cognitive dissonance whereby individuals know intellectually that their community or country is their rightful home, but cognitively-emotionally perceive they are not at home. Moreover, this range of thoughts and emotions is internally generated and it is difficult to know with certainty the degree to which external forces, such as rejection by the larger community, is the genesis of feelings of psychological homelessness.

As expected, distinct maladaptive cognitions predicted psychological homelessness. Specifically, negative cognitions

about the self in relation to deportation and negative cognitions about the world predicted feelings of psychological homelessness. Deportees who viewed themselves in a pejorative light were more likely to experience feeling unwelcomed by other Salvadorans and be more sensitive to social pressures to conform to Salvadoran cultural norms. Moreover, those who held attitudes that life is unpredictable and that people are not trustworthy were more likely to feel that they did not belong in El Salvador. These findings are consistent with those of studies in diverse contexts that indicate that individuals who experience negative cognitions related to their place in the world and the world's relative benignity often feel out of place and struggle to bond with the community in which they reside e.g. [20, 21].

Study Limitations and Recommendations

The results of this study had various limitations that must be considered. There was no comparable control group of participants (i.e., deported Salvadorans who were not seeking assistance from the Immigration Center). It is possible that deportees who were not seeking services are faring better than those who were requesting assistance from the Center. Also, the data reported herein are correlational and the information from each participant was collected in one setting. Thus, it is impossible to know if any of the observed correlations are causal in nature. Finally, the PHS is a newly created scale in need of continued validation and refinement. We recommend that future studies examine the distinction between the constructs of psychological homelessness, marginalization, and the need for belonging. Such studies should focus on diverse immigrant and minority groups who have distinct socio-political histories.

New Contributions to the Literature

This study is one of the few studies that have examined undocumented immigrants who had been deported from the US to their home country. More importantly, however, in this study we have introduced a new and understudied construct—psychological homelessness—to the social science literature. Our findings highlight the double-bind of many undocumented immigrants in that they often struggle to obtain acceptance in a host country while losing their sense of belonging in their country of origin. Psychological homelessness likely is experienced by members of other disenfranchised populations. Potential consequences of psychological homelessness theoretically include low self-esteem, self-deprecation, and resentment toward others—all which may pejoratively affect interpersonal relations. Our findings also document that repatriated immigrants often hold maladaptive cognitions that likely exacerbate feelings of psychological homelessness.

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Appendix

English version

- *1. I feel very much at home living in El Salvador.
2. After having lived in the United States, it is hard for me to relate to other Salvadorans.
3. My family and friends here in El Salvador don't understand how I feel about life here.
- *4. It feels very comfortable being back in El Salvador.
5. For me, things just aren't the same anymore in El Salvador.
6. Now that I'm back in El Salvador, I do not feel accepted by other Salvadorans.
- *7. El Salvador still feels like "home" to me.
8. I miss my life in the United States.
9. I don't feel like I belong here in El Salvador any more.
- *10. I feel at ease living in El Salvador again.

Note: * Items are reverse scored.

Response options

- 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = unsure;
4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree

Spanish version

- *1. Viviendo en El Salvador, me siento muy en casa.
2. Después de vivir en los Estados Unidos es difícil llevarme bien con otros salvadoreños.
3. Mi familia y amigos aquí en El Salvador no entienden lo que siento sobre la vida aquí.
- *4. Me siento muy cómodo al estar de regreso en El Salvador.
5. Para mí las cosas no son las mismas en El Salvador.
6. Ahora que estoy de regreso en El Salvador, no me siento aceptado o acogido por otros salvadoreños.
- *7. El Salvador todavía me hace sentir en casa.
8. Extraño mi vida en los EE.UU.
9. Siento que ya no pertenezco aquí a El Salvador.
- *10. Me siento bien viviendo nuevamente en El Salvador.

Note: * Items are reverse scored.

Response options

- 1 = muy en desacuerdo; 2 = en desacuerdo; 3 = ni en desacuerdo ni de acuerdo; 4 = de acuerdo; 5 = muy de acuerdo

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