

**THE AMERICAN DREAM: FROM A LATINO
PERSPECTIVE**

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Abstract

In this paper, the American Dream is observed from the perspective of Latino immigrants living in the United States. Latinos are currently one of the largest growing minority groups and one of the largest growing populations in the US. We have seen a growth of the Latino population over the years, and although the American Dream was previously something that past generations were able to achieve, this paper will discuss the barriers that most recent generations are facing and how those barriers are affecting the mental health of these individuals. The barriers focused on specifically include legal status, educational access, exclusion, and opportunity. There is also a focus on the perception that Latinos living in other countries may have of the American Dream, especially their optimism of it. In 2016, Pew Research Center conducted a study regarding how Latinos felt about the American Dream. Results from this study indicate that most Latinos believe in the American Dream, in terms of being able to be successful with only hard work and determination. This optimistic perception of the American Dream leads to an immense amount of unrealistic hope for these individuals. This meaning of the American Dream creates a picture that only these two things are needed to achieve success, and individuals are truly passionate about it. However, the barriers in place, especially for Latino immigrants, are not being considered or even discussed more often. The result of these barriers coming to individuals as a surprise, has led to higher rates of mental health disorders, including depression and anxiety, within Latino immigrant communities.

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Introduction

When you hear the phrase “American Dream,” what do you think of? Is it something that sounds familiar to you, but has no personal meaning? Is it what your parents raised you saying was their ultimate life goal? Is it *your* ultimate life goal? Considering everyone has their own ideas of what this phrase means, there are a million ways in which it can be defined. As a Latina born and raised in the US, the meaning of this phrase has changed for me over the years. There are many advantages to being born in the US and it’s important to understand that, because there are many individuals that do not have this advantage. Regardless, identifying as Latina and seeing the barriers that people in the Latino community face, has shifted my perspective on the American Dream.

“The Latinx community has the belief that there are opportunities for individual and family prosperity through hard work in the U.S.” (Cervantes, et al., 2021). Although this is a belief that can encourage individuals to work hard, it does not advertise the barriers that come with being a part of a minority group along with it. Minority groups are mentally affected by these barriers, because they work hard and many of them never see the same opportunities as others.

This is a literature review of prior studies on the mental health effects caused by the phrase ‘American Dream’ that will evidence the realities of the struggles for those who aim to achieve the American dream, specifically, Latino immigrants in the U.S. According to a study conducted by Pew Research, Latinos are more likely than the general U.S. public to believe in the American Dream *and* to agree that with hard work, most people can be successful (Lopez et al., 2020). The American Dream is something

that the Latino community significantly believes in, but the discussion of why it has become more difficult to obtain and how this negatively impacts their mental health, is crucial.

This is not to denounce the American Dream or to say that immigrants of the Latino community have *never* achieved this goal. Overtime came more barriers to being able to achieve this dream and the reality of being able to successfully accomplish it has changed significantly. Recent studies have shown the barriers that come with identifying as Latino/a. Including, educational access, legal status, exclusion, and opportunity. Studies are currently discussing the way in which optimism is associated with creating a false perception of the American Dream as well. Optimism is associated with hope and encouragement, but when it becomes something that people hold on to for so long without any success, it becomes a barrier. Additionally, the battle between individuals and these barriers are resulting in their mental health being affected, which makes it something that needs to be discussed.

Optimism

“Optimism is a general trait or tendency of an individual to be confident in expecting positive outcomes” (Cervantes et al., 2021, p.137). In addition, “optimism is associated with better mental and physical health, motivation, and performance” (Cervantes et al., 2021, p.137). According to Cervantes et al., individuals from countries where there is an overwhelming amount of violence and poverty, become optimistic of what their lives could be like in the US, especially when they see or hear stories of the American Dream being accomplished. Consequently, when immigrants come to the US,

they are confident that by simply working hard, they will be successful with achieving the American Dream, like the other stories they have been exposed to.

A survey conducted by Lopez et al. (2018), Latinos were more likely to believe in the American Dream compared to the US public population. The survey showed an emphasis on the belief that hard work and determination are the most essential components to achieving the American Dream (77% Latinos vs. 62% of the general US population). There is also a higher percentage of the participants that believed that their children would have a better life than they did (72% Latinos vs. 46% of the general US population).

On the contrary, an exploratory study conducted by Cervantes et al., (2021), regarding the optimism of the American Dream from the perspective of Latino immigrants and nonimmigrants, shows both positive and negative perspectives on the American Dream. According to this study, the negative concepts documented from study include, “shifting cultural orientation, the role of racism and discrimination, false expectations, the need to overwork and study hard, and immigration and legal barriers that interfere with living the American Dream” (Cervantes et al., 2021, p.141).

With these two contradicting results, it is evident that a population, such as the Latino immigrant population, has higher percentages of people that believe in the American Dream, but are simultaneously facing many barriers that are not allowing them to achieve the American Dream. Many barriers that the study conducted by Cervantes et al. documents, are topics that are not generally discussed when presenting the positive aspects of the American Dream. This generation of Latino immigrants’ mental health are being impacted by the American Dream, and it is evident how much of that impact has to

do with their perception and optimism of the American Dream. The optimism of Latino immigrants has transitioned from being something positive, to a false perception.

Educational access

The main component in achieving the American Dream is education (Cervantes et al., 2021, p.144). If education is the main component in achieving the American Dream, and if the American Dream can be achieved by *anyone*, why are Latino communities facing barriers to educational access? Hispanic/Latino communities express the importance of being more educated to achieve it, as well as the lack of employable skills that are actively reducing their chances of achieving it (Cervantes et al., 2021, p. 147).

Legal status has one of the greatest effects on educational access of immigrant youth in the US (Cortes, 2013). While legal status has other effects on mental health as well, it is primarily associated with the barrier to educational access. Legal status, in terms of the law, causes immigrant youth to be less likely to enroll in college (Cortes, 2013).

Although there are laws in place for access to free public schooling, the support of postsecondary education is not merely shown the same significant recognition (Cortes, 2013). When this is taken into consideration, it is obvious as to why Latino communities are not gaining the same employable skills as their counterparts, and why they are not able to reach the level education needed, although they are aware of education being a strong component in achievement. Another component factoring into Latino communities not receiving the same educational access as other communities, is the language barrier (Cervantes et al., 2021). Implementing more programs, such as ESL courses, GED courses, are important to focus on in all school systems, because with more innovative strategies being enforced, this could lead to more engagement from the Latino

communities in education (Cervantes et al., 2021, p. 150). If we do not integrate new strategies to engage our communities, these barriers will stay in place, and we will not see a change in minority groups' achievement. Overall, when the perception of achieving the American dream is believed to consist of educational opportunities, and the barriers in place are not discussed and repaired, this is where educational access is limited, and mental health is affected.

Legal status

Although legal status intersects with each of the barriers mentioned in this review, it is a barrier alone. Regarding the study by Menjívar, on Guatemalan and Salvadoran immigrants in the US, “uncertain legal status molds their experiences with the U.S. educational system, as well as their prospects for the future” (Menjívar, 2008, p. 178). “Uncertain legal status” refers to individuals that are undocumented or have permanent legal residence.” The term 'undocumented immigrant' refers to anyone residing in any given country without legal documentation. It includes people who entered the U.S. without inspection and proper permission from the government, and those who entered with a legal visa that is no longer valid” (Immigrants Rising, 2006). Even though permanent legal residents have the right to work in the U.S, they are still in this “uncertain” state, because they are not guaranteed the amount of time, they will be able to stay, and overall, do not have the same rights as U.S. citizens. In terms of voting and security, a U.S. citizen entails these rights.

Additionally, legal status affects the individuals with higher education degrees from their countries. Menjívar states, “immigrants come in with some years of higher education or with completed college degrees but by virtue of their legal marginality

cannot advance economically in their adopted country” (Menjívar, 2008, p. 183). When these individuals come to the U.S., and do not have the same resources as individuals that completed their degrees in the U.S., they are left without the information they need to pursue these careers. Further, the rights that U.S. citizens or individuals that have studied in the U.S., entail are different from Latino immigrants. Legal status, again, becomes a barrier for immigrants; all while they are trying to pursue higher educational careers.

Furthermore, there are also Latino immigrants that fall under the category of Dreamers. [The DREAM Act of 2023 (S. 365) would establish a process for Dreamers to apply for conditional legal status and ultimately become citizens]. According to Garcini et al., “among the more than 11 million undocumented immigrants residing in the United States, more than one million are acculturated undocumented youths who were brought to the United States as children by their parents” (Garcini et al, 2017, p. 623). Unfortunately, the youth, although they did not choose for themselves to leave their home countries, are faced to battle everything other immigrant parents are faced with, just at a different level. These individuals are faced with discrimination in the school setting, which often puts them at risk for psychological distress and constant fear (Garcini et al.). Without access to mental health services, compared to peers, the Latino immigrant youth will most likely carry these stressors and fears into adulthood.

As mentioned by Cervantes et al., earlier in this discussion, the biggest component, and one which Latino immigrants are aware of, is the association between education and the achievement of the American Dream. Nonetheless, when there is uncertainty of legal status, this is going to weigh on educational success.

Exclusion

Three studies conducted by Devos et al., discussed the interconnections between Latino American and Caucasian American identities. “Consistently, Latino Americans as a group were conceived of as being less American than Caucasian Americans” (Devos et al., 2010, p. 37). Why does this matter? The American Dream is a concept believed to be equally attainable by anyone in the U.S., but the sense of equality is eliminated when individuals feel as though they are less American than other groups of individuals around them. The study this paper will focus on from all three studies conducted by Devos et al., is Study 1. In Study 1, participants were all U.S. citizens, and were undergraduate students at San Diego State University. Already, the participants in this study were at an immense advantage compared to many of the individuals who identify as Latino/a. The results of this study show that there is an overall “stronger linkage” between American identities and Caucasian Americans, rather than between American identities and Latino Americans; based on various aspects such as, social status, power, and length of immersion in American society (Devos et al., 2010, p. 40). The various aspects of social status, power, and length of immersion in American society, all factor into the barriers already discussed in this paper regarding, educational access, legal status, and opportunity.

In our society, Latino Americans are not equally seen as “American” and feel “less American” compared to other Americans. This study’s participants were all U.S. citizens, and there is still a sense of exclusion and comparison between identities. Terriquez (2021) reviews important components of Maria Rendon’s, *Stagnant Dreamers: How the Inner City Shapes the Integration of Second-Generation Latinos*, and its study of the theory of segmented assimilation. “The theory suggests that second-generation inner-

city youth are at risk of downward assimilation-meaning that they end up worse off than their immigrant parents, especially if they grow up in poor urban, nonwhite communities” (Terriquez, 2021, p. 842). Rendon’s study regarding this theory examines the barrier of exclusion that even Latino U.S. born citizens are faced with. Regarding Latino immigrants, it is evident that they are excluded even further than the second-generation of Latinos. Latino immigrants come to the U.S. envisioning their achievement of the American Dream and believe that the generations to follow will be better off because of it. When they see the realities of exclusion in the U.S. and how the second-generation is in fact, not better off, especially if they have not been able to obtain their dreams, this has a negative impact on them mentally and emotionally.

The “American Dream” is something that is supposed to be easily accessible to Americans, yes, but there is an issue here when not every American feels as American as their counterparts. This is not to simplify the matter, but if Latino Americans themselves, and their counterparts, do not see each other as equals, then the American Dream is not something that Latino immigrants are given the same opportunities of achieving.

Opportunity

Dreamers in the U.S, although these individuals are protected under the DREAM Act, still do not have the same opportunities as U.S. born citizens (Stacciarini et al., 2015). Their constant fear of deportation, lack of access to items such as books, school supplies, and clothes, and coming from a low-income immigrant household that financially could use the help, results in many of these young Latino immigrants dropping out of high school. Compared to their peers, they are also less likely to attend college if they finish high school, due to their financial strains (Stacciarini et al., 2015). They are protected in

the school setting, but that does not mean they are any less fearful of being deported or fitting in, in that school setting. Mentally, these are all barriers that are not allowing Latino immigrants the same opportunities as their peers, and the cycle continues for them into adulthood.

Mental health

“Latinos have higher rates of major depression and higher risk for other mental health illnesses than native-born ethnic groups and whites” (Shobe et al., 2009). Additionally, “less than 1 in 20 Latino immigrants who have a mental health disorder seek help from a mental health specialist” (Shobe et al., 2009). Latinos may also be fearful of going to a hospital if uninsured, not able to speak/understand the language, and seeking help overall. It is evident that Latinos are already in a category where they have high rates of mental health illnesses but have low rates of seeking help for those illnesses. On top of that, they have the highest rates of believing in the American Dream but are faced with various barriers that do not allow them the same opportunity to achieve it as their counterparts. The numerous barriers in place preventing Latino immigrants the opportunity to achieve the American Dream and their constant state of fear is impacting them their mental health and this discussion, although many times not talked about, is a major topic that requires attention.

In terms of “machismo,” it is less likely for Latino men to seek help for their mental health (Davis, J & Liang, C, 2015). Machismo is a term that is widely used throughout the Latino culture and communities, and it has become heavily normalized. Due to individuals identifying with *machismo*, their sense of belonging disappears when they are not able to do something, or they are required to seek help. Although it may be

that Latinos are letting their pride get in the way of seeking help, Latino culture has certain customs that cannot be changed no matter where you reside. Machismo is one of these customs, and even if it may not have a good meaning, if individuals are raised a certain way and then this sense of belonging is ripped away from them, their mental health is likely to be negatively impacted.

Regarding the rates of mental health illnesses for Latino's, it is crucial to consider all the factors that are evidently pushing these rates. The study conducted by Shobe et al, found that not only economic strain (which may result from lack of opportunity and educational access) is associated with depression, but that not having a support system is also associated with depression as well. The study found that Latino immigrants with a bigger support system, including friends and family, were less likely to be depressed than those without a support system. A support system may look different for everyone, but it has been shown to lessen the depression rate, especially for Latinos in a country where they are not always accepted. Consequently, when factors such as access, opportunity, and status are all being intertwined, it is no surprise that there are high rates of mental health illnesses in the Latino communities. Even more so, when the American Dream is portrayed as something that is easily attainable with hard work.

Furthermore, Martinez et al., conducted a study highlighting the long-term effects of immigration enforcement policies in Colorado. The study discusses the effect these policies have on the emotional health and overall well-being of Latino immigrants. In 2013, the rate of deportation in the U.S. skyrocketed. "Close to 439,000 unauthorized immigrants were deported that year, more than half of whom were deported for noncriminal violations" (Martinez, M. & Ortega, D., 2019 p. 120). The study shares the

real-life stories of undocumented Latino immigrants and evidences the impact these policies had on their well-being.

A participant of the study shared that with the detention of her and her husband, her children were left with trauma (Martinez, M. & Ortega, D., 2019). The participant and her husband were pulled over for speeding but ended up being arrested and placed in a detention facility, because they were undocumented. The participant shared, regarding her children, that “They became anxious at the mere sight of a police car, and that although the contact with law enforcement was brief, the consequences induced a host of negative outcomes, including fear, stress, and anxiety” (Martinez, M. & Ortega, D., 2019, p. 129). The study explains the effect that these policies have, not only on Latino immigrants, but their children as well. When there are multiple generations of impacted mental health issues, it becomes clear as to why the mental health of Latino immigrants and generations to follow, should be acknowledged more.

A direct quote from one of the participants of this study expresses exactly what this literature review is analyzing:

“Being undocumented, being people without rights, you know you’re breaking the laws. Mentally, it’s like we deserve it because it’s our fault. But then I realized that, I’m trying to do my best, trying to take all the opportunities that’s out there for me just to succeed” (Martinez, M. & Ortega, D., 2019, p. 130).

Living in a constant state of fear, while consistently working to do your best, affects the well-being of Latino immigrants and their families, daily. Again, with this evidence being highlighted, it is clear how policies in our society may obstruct the ability for Latino immigrants to obtain the American Dream, which may then further the negative impact on their mental health.

Likewise, the fear of deportation and stigmatization of identities negatively affects the mental and emotional health of Latino immigrants, whether they chose to come to the U.S. for a better life, or they were brought as young children due to their caregiver's decisions (Stacciarini et al., 2015). The negative effects result in higher rates of depression and anxieties in the Latino communities. The mental health of Dreamers is discussed in this study, and those fears and negative effects could follow them into adulthood. The pressures of trying to do better for their families, on top of their mental and emotional well-being, may be something that they struggle with. It is evident that Latino immigrants struggle with their mental health but continue to push forward to make their families proud, but for a change, we must take into consideration what has affected their mental health and what issues in our society are really holding them back.

Discussion

As a society, there is still a significant amount of work we must do to create an even more diverse and comfortable space with the discussion of mental health. Sadly, we do not see how something such as the phrase, The American Dream, can create a negative impact on an individual. It is even less seen and discussed when that individual is a part of a minority group; specifically, the Latino immigrant community, in the U.S. in 2023.

Stacciarini et al., discusses the importance of intervention for Latinos, specifically to benefit society as a whole. The barriers that Latino immigrants and second-generation face are there because our society has allowed it. If we do not take a step back and consider the contributions Latinos, specifically, Latino immigrants, could give to our society, then we will never see the potential the U.S. truly has (Stacciarini et al., 2015). The removal of the barriers that are seen on a day-to-day basis is necessary, for the rates of the mental health issues in the Latino communities to decrease. The barriers discussed in this review include educational access, legal status, exclusion, and opportunity; all of which are distinct blockades, and make the American Dream unattainable for Latinos.

Despite the barriers that Latinos face, there are still beautiful stories of some achieving their dreams and having reached success in this society. Nevertheless, it is also important to discuss the reality of our current times and that success is not as easily attainable as it is made out to be. For Latino immigrants, it is as if they are in a constant state of attempting to grasp their achievements but are being tugged down each step, they get closer. However, by implementing laws that fully protect Latino immigrants and creating more spaces where discussing mental health is welcomed, there could be a shift in our society. Obtaining perspectives of the past and accepting discrimination in our society is only holding the U.S. back, because there is so much potential in individuals that are not even given a chance.

Conclusion

The American Dream is well known for being something that everyone wants and that with hard work, is easily attainable for *anyone*. Optimism, although an inspiring word, has led to a false perception for Latino immigrants attempting to obtain their goals. By

keeping their optimism and by continuing to work hard, Latinos have been blinded by the realities of the U.S. The reality is that there are unexpected barriers that they must face and that the dream is not as easy to obtain as it is painted out to be. Latino immigrants are unaware of the struggles they must face, and as a result, they are not able to achieve their goals as easily as their counterparts, and their mental well-being is severely impacted. Mental health is already a topic that is rarely discussed in Latino communities, and this has an even bigger impact on Latino immigrants because they find themselves struggling with emotions from things, they were never aware would happen to them. The combination of Latinos having a false perception and the barriers in place preventing their achievement results in the damage to their mental health, which adds additional consequences to society. This literature review highlights several studies discussing why optimism, educational access, legal status, exclusion, and opportunity are barriers for Latino immigrants to achieve the American Dream and how these barriers have a direct connection to the rise of mental health illnesses.

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