EXPLORING THE INTERSECTIONALITY OF UNDOCUMENTED LGBTQ LATINO PERSONS AKA UNDOCUQUEER LATINOS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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May 2016
There is an estimated 904,000 LGBTQ adult immigrants in the United States today (Gates, 2013).

267,000 (30%) are also undocumented LGBTQ adults - 71% are Latino/Hispanic (Gates, 2013).

The term UndocuQueer was devised by the National Immigrant Youth Alliance (NIYA) as a political identity (Lal, 2013).

More and more LGBTQ undocumented persons are coming out not only once but two times, embracing their identities and immigration status in order to tell the universal truth about immigrant experiences in this country (Vargas, 2011).

According to Meyer (2003) and Gray et al., (2015), members of minority groups especially those who simultaneously belong to more than one minority population encounter many more unique experiences and challenges than non-minority individuals. LGBTQ Latino immigrants encounter institutional barriers such as discrimination, residential segregation, decreased access to services and impact of immigration policies (E. Morales, 2013; Viruell-Fuentes et al., 2012).

Explore the experiences of being an undocumented Latino in the United States.

Explore the experiences of being an LGBTQ individual in the United States.

Explore the overarching experiences with the intersections of identifying as both an undocumented immigrant and LGBTQ Latino or UndocuQueer Latinos.
Underlined within the NASW Code of Ethics, it is stated that it is the duty of social workers to enhance human well being and help meet human needs of all people especially those who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty by providing them with service, social justice, dignity, and worth (NASW, 2015). UndocuQueer individuals, a marginalized group of minorities, fall under these categories. Social workers working with UndocuQueer individuals confront a challenge when going against federal and local systems that prohibit undocumented immigrants from accessing most social services (Furman, Langer, Sanchez, & Negi, 2007). Social workers need to be knowledgeable of the experiences that this marginalized group encounters to be able to provide culturally sensitive services, serve with dignity, and reassure a sense of worth and purpose in individuals who often lack support and resources.
As one of the fastest growing populations in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013), Latino immigrants have been subjected through media, political, and social ideology as an undeserving population (Gonzalez, Suárez-Orozco, & Dedios-Sanguineti, 2013). When adding the characteristics of LGBTQ and an undocumented status, this already vulnerable population has limited resources and support. UndocuQueer individuals encounter the simultaneous impact of being a triple minority by being an ethnic minority, a sexual minority, and holding an undocumented status. Understanding each of these individual concepts and the unique experiences and barriers each group faces is valuable knowledge when trying to work with someone who identifies as UndocuQueer. Although there is little research on the unique experiences of UndocuQueer Latinos, this study hopes to increase knowledge of each identity and bring more awareness to the unique experiences an UndocuQueer Latino faces.
METHODS

Sample Method

- Due to the marginalization of UndocuQueer individuals, snowball sampling process was used in order to identify potential participants. Seven participants agreed to participate in this study. Two were females (identifying as Lesbian and Bisexual) and 5 were males that identified as Gay (n=4) and bisexual (n=1).

- The eligibility criteria was as follows:
  1) Between the ages of 18-40 years;
  2) Identify as an Undocumented individual;
  3) Identify as LGBTQ or UndocuQueer;
  4) Identify as Latino or Hispanic;
  5) Currently reside in Los Angeles or Orange Counties in California, United States.

Data Collection

- First, the researcher reached out to existing social networks and invited people known to be eligible for the study as well as several groups on campus such as Future Underrepresented Educated Leaders (FUEL) and The Dream Success Center at CSULB. Interested participants contacted the researcher at the email or number provided on the flyer. Due to the confidentiality and privacy protection, participants were read the eligibility criteria and if a participant agreed to continue with the process, they were then asked to schedule a time and place for the interview. All interviews were conducted in person and face-to-face and took place in a private location according to the interviewee’s choosing. All participants were provided with a Consent Form informing the participants about the purpose of the study, their rights to withdraw, refuse to answer questions, their right to confidentiality, the audio recording of the interviews, and the possible impact of personal questions. Interviews took between 60-90 minutes.

- Upon completion of the interview, participants were provided with a $5 Starbucks gift card and were given extra flyers, and asked to pass along the information about the study to others who met the eligibility criteria.
A semi-structured interview guide consisting of 15 open-ended questions was utilized to capture the narratives of participants. The interview guide was divided into three sections; each section explored the different aspects of an UndocuQueer Latino’s identity: Undocumented Status, LGBTQ Latino identity, and the intersection of all three.

After the interviews were completed, the researcher transcribed each audio-recording and thoroughly reviewed each transcription for emerging themes utilizing the Grounded Theory Approach (GTA). The GTA is an approach for the development of a theory from a body of data by reading and analyzing field notes in order to discover and conceptualize social patterns and structures from a qualitative study (Rubin & Babbie, 2010). The transcriptions were reviewed repeatedly and as themes were established, the researcher was able to code each response according to content, and proceed to develop categories once patterns were identified.

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data from the demographic survey. Frequency distributions were run for the appropriate variables. Measures of Central Tendency and Variability were used for continuous variables. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 22) was used to analyze the survey data.
RESULTS

Utilizing the Grounded Theory Approach, eight themes emerged.

- **1) Understanding of their Undocumented Status from an Early Age.** Although many didn’t comprehend what made them different from their peers until they were denied the ability to complete transitional age youth activities such as obtaining a license, getting a job, and applying to college, most participants were told to keep their immigration status quiet. Their understanding of their immigration status however made them value the importance of an education in order to gain some sort of purpose and opportunity to succeed.

- **2) Different Perceptions of Support from Latino Community** - All participants (n=7) perceived the support from the Latino community towards their undocumented status to be more positive than towards their LGBTQ identity. Support towards the undocumented status is perceived to be more supported by the Latino community due to past personal history and experience from immigrants. Being undocumented is almost the norm among Latinos. It is not uncommon to have mix status families especially in Southern California. The lack of support from the Latino community towards the LGBTQ community is due to the religious and cultural values in the Latino community. Six of the seven participants were raised Catholic. This study found that Latino immigrant parents, who were raised in a more traditional home tend to be more closed off about the LGBTQ community than U.S born Latinos who were acculturated to the ever-changing mainstream American society at a younger age, especially in Southern California.

- **3) Latino Cultural Induced Internalized Homophobia** - All participants (n=7) discussed experiencing internal homophobia because LGBT issues or being part of the LGBTQ community was never discussed in the household and if it was it was ridiculed or brushed away. It is a common misconception in the Latino community, especially among those who may not be open-minded or knowledgeable about the LGBT community, that once an individual is gay, that means that individual (male) wants to be a woman or that their sexuality changes them completely. The cultural idea of masculinity for Latino males who are gay is often a major barrier to their own coming out process. For the male participants, masculinity or the pressure to be masculine was highly present in their lives and oftentimes the outcome reflected the development of internalized homophobia before the coming out process.
  - Ernesto: If you are gay you are mentally unstable, something had to be wrong if you were growing up. That had a much bigger weight than religion could of. With my dad it was about masculinity. One thing my dad said (after coming out) was ‘well are you going to start wearing women’s clothing?’

Although each of the male participants (n=5) embraced their LGBTQ identity, masculinity through cultural roots and ideas is still present in their lives. Through their outward expression and persona, or outward demeanor, 4 of the 5 male participants depicted themselves as being slightly in the middle to more masculine in the spectrum of feminine to masculine, “I don’t look gay and I don’t act gay. I’m pretty masculine so people assume I’m straight all the time.” By maintaining their masculine identity, they are also carrying their rich cultural roots; a sense of pride and empowerment as Latino males.

- **4) Common Stressors** listed by participants that affected their multiple identities consisted of uncertainty of their future regarding the 2016 Presidential Election and the possible impact of a new President on DACA and the Marriage Equality Act. Although six of the participants have benefitted from DACA in great ways, they live with the understanding of the limitations that they still possess. DACA is temporary and has no legal pathways towards residency or citizenship. Will DACA be modified, expanded, or completely terminated? For the many individuals who rely on it to continue working and going to school, thoughts like these have become highly visible and have either resulted in a stronger desire to come out and educate others about their status or have lead others to choose carefully who they will share their immigration status with.

The passage of the Marriage Equality Act was a great victory for the LGBTQ community. Undocumented LGBTQ individuals can now be petitioned by their citizen partners towards residency. This has developed the new stressor of thinking and considering marriage, something that was not a priority before among these individuals. Marriage, family, and the act of starting a family are viewed as highly important in the Latino community. Now, with the opportunity to gain residency through marriage even among same sex couples, the idea of marriage is a high possibility and many of these participants feel the pressure from their family members to get married.
5) **Multiple Intersectionalities Build a Stronger Character and Coping Skills** - Undocumented LGBTQ Latinos who have come out accepted their identities because it was a part of who they were as a person and what drove them to be able to adapt and complete the impossible as members of two marginalized communities. Although there were many hardships, barriers, and stressors present due to their identities, participants were proud of their background because it allowed them to grow and become better human beings. Jose shared:

I think it’s a privilege being a part of all those groups. I think I get the best of all those worlds but I also get the bad of every world. I think it’s a privilege because when you have so many identities and so many different hats, you’re able to adapt faster and able to respond to situations calmer and figure out things because in some ways you can relate. The Latino struggles, the LGBT struggles. All the struggles kind of create who you are in a way that allows you to adapt to every situation.

Through the acceptance of their multiple stigmatized identities, a sense of autonomy is also established that helps allow individuals in these situations to be more able to come out and remain proud even when they encounter many barriers. They identify those barriers and hold on to them. Although it is hard, it provides zeal to want to make it and become their own person.

6) **Sense of Hope: Beacon of Change through Political and Civil Involvement** - Although varying along the spectrum of involvement, each participant was engaged in different ways through their identity groups or through taking the responsibility of educating others about their identities in order to bring change. As an undocumented LGBTQ individual who works closely with LGBT families and rallies throughout the country, Jose stated, “When you come out of the closet as LGBT, you conquer this fear that by the time there is an issue that is affecting the Latino or immigrants community you are able to step up for those platforms, for those issues. So the whole double coming out has helped us, the UndocuQueer activist, to become better persons in helping our communities.” The amount of awareness in the current events of the 2016 Presidential election was common topic of interest as participants can be highly impacted by the Marriage Equality Act and most importantly, President Obama’s Executive Action, The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) which is a policy that six participants benefit from.

7) **Education and DACA as a Protective Factor** - For most of these individuals, coming out and finding acceptance within themselves was fully reached when entering some form of higher education. All participants were either currently working towards or had received their bachelors. Majority of these participants (n=6) currently benefit from the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and have work permits, licenses, and a temporary social security number that has changed their lives immensely and allowed them to pursue careers and further their educations and build a strong internal confidence to speak out about injustices and share their multiple identities.

8) **Taking Different Roles** - Each participant described on occasions when one identity is prevalent versus the other depending on who was present and what the situation was like. Role switching from work, to school, home, at an immigration rally, or hanging out with members of the LGBT community took time and effort. There was an appropriate time when one could emphasize their identity over the other for example Jose shares his experience, “Now because I work with two LGBT organizations I identify more as LGBT than undocumented because I am in an open spaces where that is the theme. People know I’m gay, people probably don’t know I’m undocumented.” The different identities can also come out in several ways. Unless you are open about it, society does not question your immigration status unlike they question your sexual orientation or gender identity through your mannerism or non-normative gender roles. In other words, one’s undocumented status is not as noticeable as their LGBT identity that is often guessed or assumed by others through one’s differences in gender mannerism.
DISCUSSION/IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK

- If social workers are not conscious of the political and economic considerations against immigrants, social workers can fall into government enforcement of exclusionary immigration policies (Humphries, 2004).
- Social workers need to understand the policies and lack of resources that can hinder possibly providing services to UndocuQueer Latinos and bring about awareness to a macro level of social work so change in policies can be enabled.
- Undocumented LGBTQ individuals are doubly marginalized and it is the duty of social workers to provide individuals with as much support and resources as possible and to advocate for policy changes that will serve this doubly marginalized population and their basic human rights.
- This study hopes to provide knowledge and spread awareness of the double marginalized community that is present in the United States. Although it was a broad study, it hopes to be a base for future studies and help bring quality services and change to the lives of hundreds of thousands of UndocuQueer Latinos.
REFERENCES


