



The Voice of Psychology in California

Recommendations for Psychological Practice with Undocumented Immigrants in California

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In 2003, APA put forth guidelines that reframed the role of psychologists as leaders and advocates of social justice and multiculturalism in all realms of their professional identity (Constantine & Sue, p. 24). Specifically, APA Multicultural Guidelines identified foundational principles that "articulate respect and inclusiveness for the national heritage of all groups, recognition of cultural contexts as defining forces for individuals' and groups' lived experiences, and the role of external forces such as historical, economic, and socio-political events" (APA, 2003, p. 382). In 2017, APA updated these guidelines, reconsidering diversity and multiculturalism by adopting intersectionality as its main purview and using a layered ecological model (APA, 2017).

An external force laden with oppression is immigration documentation status, and how it intersects with individuals' many identities and aspects of diversity. California's undocumented immigrant population is so large and well established, with one quarter of the national total (Passel & Cohn, 2016), that efforts to deport or prohibit their employment would have a major impact on the state's economy (Fortuny et al, 2007). Furthermore, one in 10 California residents are in a family headed by an undocumented immigrant, compared with one in 20 nationally (Passel & Cohn, 2016). All members of these mixed status families are profoundly affected by "draconian arrest, incarceration, and deportation practices of the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency" (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011).

Recently, undocumented immigrants and their loved ones have been acutely impacted by the anti-immigrant rhetoric surrounding the presidential election and the current administration's strong push to increase enforcement, reduce overall immigration, and eliminate temporary status programs. Since January 2017, immigration arrests increased by 40 percent from the same time last year, according to statistics released by ICE (Blitzer, 2017). President Trump also recently announced the phasing out of programs including Temporary Protected Status (TPS) and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), impacting nearly 300,000 and 800,000 (a third of them residing in California alone), respectively.



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This hostile climate has likely heightened undocumented immigrants' ever-present fear of deportation, placed additional constraints on those who are increasingly involved in advocacy or serving as protectors of more vulnerable family members, and reduced their sense of safety regarding being out and seeking support from allies. In response, mental health providers who come in contact with undocumented immigrants often scramble for the latest federal, state, and institutional policy and strive to advocate for non-traditional support services. Additionally, providers with experience working with undocumented immigrants are often members of marginalized communities themselves, and tend to be in high demand, which reduces their availability to provide specialized services.

Liberation psychology suggests that these providers are overwhelmed with the tasks of actively working to decolonize their own political consciousness given their awareness of the limitations of western individualistic ideologies that favor the privileged, and concomitantly seeking new ways of working with marginalized communities and immigrant families. Understanding how the combination of socio-political factors and provider limitations impact undocumented immigrant wellness is critical in evolving our existing models to account for the many layers of intersecting identities, histories, memories, and language of undocumented immigrants (Espín, 2015; Martín-Baró, 1994).

The California Psychological Association (CPA), its Task Force on Immigration, and its members are concerned about the experiences of undocumented immigrants. The following recommendations have been adapted for mental health professionals (MHPs) who provide services to undocumented immigrants. APA's Multicultural Guidelines (APA, 2003, 2017) inspired the guiding framework for these recommendations, particularly their emphasis on ecology, context, and intersectionality, and their principles for culturally competent psychological practice, research, education and training, and organizational change. It is noteworthy to emphasize that the following recommendations were developed for the unique context of the state of California, and the specific observed needs of undocumented immigrants in this state.

Recommendations for Psychological Practice with Undocumented Immigrants:

- I. Liberation Psychology provides a framework for addressing the underlying power dynamics in human relations and social systems with the aim of transforming inequality and oppression to meet the basic needs of all people (Montero, 2009). For example, nativist narratives criminalize undocumented immigrants by creating a "stigma of illegality" and perpetuate racism toward communities of color. In an effort to mitigate this impact, psychologists can apply Liberation Psychology tenets



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in the following ways: (a) recognize the attitudes and beliefs that they hold about undocumented immigrant populations; (b) engage in self-reflection and seek feedback around dominant traditional mental health models that serve privileged communities and thus perpetuate horizontal oppression (Espin, 2015); (c) analyze where their attitudes and beliefs about undocumented immigrants have been formed (i.e., through personal experiences, formal education and training, media or colloquial narratives); and (d) continuously engage in experiences that allow them to challenge inaccurate or detrimental attitudes and beliefs about undocumented immigrants.

- II. In understanding that undocumented immigrants may have experiences that differ from their own, psychologists may benefit from consistently engaging in education about these differences. In particular, psychologists are encouraged to engage in *formal* (i.e., coursework, continuing education workshops, webinars, research), *informal* (i.e., videos, popular media, movies, books), and *experiential* (i.e., volunteering in immigrant communities, friendships with immigrants) learning opportunities to further understand undocumented immigrants' unique life experiences. Additionally, psychologists are encouraged to engage in education to further understand state and federal policies impacting undocumented immigrants' development and mental health. Psychologists are also encouraged to learn about the personal and subjective ways that undocumented immigrants' multiple identities (i.e., race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, ability/disability, educational and social status, age) intersect with their immigration status, and how this intersectionality may serve to buffer or exacerbate mental health distress. Finally, psychologists are encouraged to learn about how localized natural, sociopolitical, and socioeconomic events (e.g., immigration raids, natural disasters, housing shortages) impact undocumented immigrants' well being.
- III. Psychologists are encouraged to recognize the significant role they may play in educating clients, colleagues, students, and lay audiences with accurate information about immigrants. Psychologists are encouraged to use their training in multiculturalism and diversity in the following ways: (a) engage in broad-reaching educational efforts to dispel myths about immigrants; (b) enhance the cultural competence of other practitioners; and (c) increase cultural sensitivity and empathy toward immigrants in the masses. Psychologists may benefit from examining the degree to which they are able to engage in these psycho-educational efforts in the roles that they currently occupy within institutions (i.e., community agencies, clinics and hospitals, schools, colleges and universities) and larger communities. Lastly, psychologists may be well positioned, because of their training and expertise, to play a pivotal role in ally-development for undocumented immigrants.



- IV. Studies of undocumented immigrants pose significant methodological challenges around immigration documentation status, since they may be reluctant to expose themselves out of fear of deportation (Sullivan & Rehm, 2005). According to Ellis and Chen (2013), the “fear of confiding in others as well as pain associated with the experience of living in the shadows” have tested researchers’ understanding of the psychological effects of being undocumented (p. 251). Psychologists who engage in research and knowledge creation are encouraged to consider the following methodological limitations of their scientific practice when it comes to studying undocumented immigrants: (a) lack of peer-reviewed studies and appropriate normative standards in existing psychological assessment instruments, (b) emphasis on certain immigrant subgroups (e.g., Latinx, DACAmented, childhood arrivals, college students) and inherent exclusion of other less-known immigrant subgroups, and (c) methodological limitations about how undocumented immigrant demographic information is collected and estimated. Furthermore, psychologists are encouraged to consider the narratives with which they represent the experiences of undocumented immigrants in their research, and to question whether these narratives serve to sustain the marginalization and oppression of these communities. Finally, researchers are encouraged to consider the ways in which research may serve as a tool for empowerment for undocumented immigrants, and ways in which these individuals and communities may have a voice in creating knowledge about themselves. Some research methods that mitigate the power differential between researcher and participant and take into account both existing methodological limitations and socio-cultural factors include qualitative research methods such as Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR), Testimonios, and Participatory Action Research (PAR).
- V. Psychologists are encouraged to understand cultural responsiveness, cultural humility, and culturally appropriate skills not as being finite, but as evolving and fluid. Psychologists strive to understand legal and ethical issues around confidentiality, disclosure, informed consent, and record keeping, and how these may impact undocumented immigrants’ interactions with the legal system. For example, using words like “undocumented” and “illegal/illegal alien” can be replaced by “issues related to immigration status” or “impact on mental health related to political environment” in order to protect clients against subpoenas. Additionally, extra steps can be taken during the informed consent process regarding the limits to confidentiality including court orders and mandated reporting. Psychologists are also encouraged to understand undocumented immigrants’ individual spiritual beliefs, as well as the ways in which indigenous and traditional healing and other community-based healing practices are utilized by



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clients based on their cultural beliefs and in their native language. For example, undocumented immigrants may benefit from a strengths-based approach, focused on resilience and collective strength, monolingual and bilingual psychotherapy in clients' native language, and treatment plans that incorporate appropriate alternative forms of healing (i.e. sobadoras, limpias, shamans, temescalli, acupuncture) (Carrillo, 2017). Psychologists may also use cultural sensitivity in designing support groups, outreach programs, and safe spaces for undocumented immigrants to increase access to and destigmatize psychological services.

- VI. Culturally responsive psychologists understand the systemic issues surrounding immigration status. As such, it is important to: (a) stay abreast of fluctuating immigration policies through professional resources and immigrant advocacy websites (e.g. ImmigrantLegalResourceCenter.org); (b) validate the impact of xenophobia and racism through culturally-informed psycho-education on race-based stress and stereotype threat; (c) help clients increase insight about their symptoms and create a coping plan that offers tools for grounding in the midst of uncertainty and political scapegoating [#RacialTraumalsReal: Racism Recovery Plan Steps (Alumni Advisory Group Institution for the Study & Promotion of Race, 2015)]; (d) incorporate interventions designed to increase clients' understanding of stereotype threat on their difficulties and provide tools to overcome these obstacles; (e) incorporate the use of Family Preparedness Plans (Immigrant Legal Resource Center, 2017) to help families plan for worst case scenarios and include decisions about child custody in the case of separation due to detainment, emergency contact numbers, legal preparations, etc.; and (f) stay abreast of their own community's legal services (e.g. Know-Your-Rights clinics), law enforcement climate, and other immigrant friendly resources. For more information see APA's guide on "Working With Immigrant-Origin Clients" for assessment and trauma guidelines (APA, 2013).
- VII. Psychologists may benefit from reflecting about their spheres where they have influence and where they may promote positive change for undocumented immigrants. Psychologists are encouraged to reflect about their expertise, and how this expertise can serve as a platform to inform inclusive institutional and organizational practices and policies that provide more access to services to undocumented immigrants. Furthermore, psychologists understand that social and policy change is needed to alleviate the sociopolitical stressors impacting undocumented immigrants. Therefore, psychologists engage in advocacy to change oppressive immigration policies and practices at every level. The following are ways in which psychologists can participate in institutional change impacting undocumented immigrants: (a) encourage institutions to clarify their commitment



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to a social justice framework that conceptualizes presenting concerns, addresses service gaps, and reaches undocumented immigrants from an understanding of their current realities; (b) create regular trainings for all staff to address documentation practices that do not “out” immigrant legal status, culturally sensitive and collectivist-oriented interventions, implicit bias, and legislative and policy awareness; (c) foster a culture of collaboration between community partners to build a network of support and consultation; and (d) increase points of entry to mental health services and strive to decrease stigma and fear associated with services [i.e., anonymous drop-in hours, informal consultation support, increased staff visibility at community level, increased support for community-led initiatives and activities, and public statements of solidarity that clearly delineate where intuitions stand on political matters (Educators for Fair Consideration, 2016)].



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