A critical look at immigrants who could have been disqualified from supplemental security income as a result of welfare reform

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A CRITICAL LOOK AT IMMIGRANTS WHO COULD HAVE BEEN DISQUALIFIED FROM SUPPLEMENTAL SECURITY INCOME AS A RESULT OF WELFARE REFORM

A Project
Presented to the Faculty of California State University, San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Social Work

by Ruena Borja and Ana Brunes
June 1998
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Approved by:

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the experiences of immigrants who could have lost eligibility to Supplemental Security Income as a result of Welfare Reform. These experiences were viewed in light of the history of immigrants as victims of oppression and racism, as the study used the Critical Theory paradigm. Qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews of the affected immigrants in the mental health agency where they are receiving services. Data were analyzed by the open-coding method. The findings have suggested that the participants suffered emotional, mental, and psychological consequences as a result of the prospect of losing their SSI benefits. However, they lacked the understanding of the historical discrimination of immigrants and how this policy that affected them is one indication of this pattern. This study served to raise the participants' consciousness and empowered them to take action.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ........................................ iii
PREFACE ........................................... 1
PROBLEM STATEMENT ............................... 2
LITERATURE REVIEW ............................... 10
PROBLEM FOCUS .................................... 16
METHODS .......................................... 20
RESULTS ........................................... 26
DISCUSSION ........................................ 41
APPENDIX A: Interview guide questions ........ 45
APPENDIX B: Informed Consent .................. 46
APPENDIX C: Debriefing Statement .............. 48
REFERENCES ........................................ 49
The research project was conducted by two researchers, Ruena Borja and Ana Brunes. Both researchers spent an equal amount of effort in carrying out the work involved with this project. They both conducted the research necessary for the completion of the literature review, problem statement and focus sections. Ana Brunes' focus of research was on the recent and current issues on immigrants while Ruena Borja's focus was on the historical issues pertaining to immigrants. Both researchers made the arrangement and requisites necessary to conduct the interview and were both present during all of the interview sessions. For the analysis section, the researchers used the coding method simultaneously and separately and then later on reconciled their findings and analyses. After constant exchanges of input, Ana Brunes wrote up the preliminaries, problem statement and focus and methods sections. Ruena Borja wrote up the literature review, results, discussion, appendices and reference sections. After writing up each section, the other researcher reviewed and gave feedback for the writer to consider. Both researchers convened with the research advisor.
PROBLEM STATEMENT

In the United States, the most important welfare programs are federal programs such as Social Security, Medi-Cal, Medicare, food stamps, housing, AFDC and Supplemental Security Income (SSI). SSI is a means-tested public assistance program that has been created in order to provide cash grants to aged, blind, and disabled persons. The program requires a disability that continues for one year and prevents full or part-time employment. Among services that SSI recipients receive are health and social services such as drug and alcohol abuse treatment and mental health counseling and treatment. Specifically, the people who are eligible for SSI are: "the mentally retarded, the aged who are at least 65 years old and have little or no income, those considered legally blind, adults who qualify as disabled because of a physical or mental impairment expected to last for at least 12 months, those visually impaired who do not meet the criteria for blindness, drug addicts and alcoholics who enter treatment, and children under 18 who have an impairment of comparable severity with that of an adult". (Karger & Stoesz, 1994). Previously, all American citizens and legal immigrants were
eligible for SSI. Fix (1994) estimated at one point that 69.8% of those who receive SSI benefits are legal immigrants.

A problem emerged with the creation of Public Law 104-193, commonly referred to as the Welfare Reform Act. This law threatened to deny government assistance by cutting or limiting eligibility for most federal programs such as SSI, In-Home Supportive Services and AFDC. This new law directly affects the legal immigrant population, stating that "an alien who is a qualified alien is not eligible for any specified federal program" (United States Code Congressional and Administrative News). This law states that legal immigrants are no longer eligible for federal programs unless they are: refugees, veterans and their spouses and their unmarried dependant children, and those who have worked forty qualifying quarters. (US Code Congressional and Administrative News).

This reform, which restricts welfare and public benefits to legal immigrants, is based on a national policy which states that "self-sufficiency has been a basic principle of the United States Immigration Law . . . that immigrants not depend on public resources to meet their needs . . . and that the availability of public benefits
not constitute an incentive for immigration . . . .". (US Code Congressional and Administrative News) Under these original welfare laws, many legal immigrants, most of them elderly and disabled, would have lost their SSI benefits by August 1997 because they are not American citizens.

The specific provision of Welfare Reform disqualifying legal immigrants from SSI, however, did not materialize due to several developments. After the passage of the Welfare Reform Act, the GOP was put on the defensive by the Democrats and was also faced with powerful backlash from immigrants. Political concerns began to effect the Republicans' attitude fearing a public relations disaster if severe consequences of the law would be exposed. In addition, with the rush among legal immigrants to get U.S. citizenship, primarily as a result of Welfare reform, these politicians considered their potential to become a formidable force among the electorate. Another factor they had to consider was the filing of several lawsuits by immigrant groups alleging that the denial of their benefits is a violation of their constitutional rights. More importantly, there were three factors that served as a catalyst for change of this particular law. One is the intense lobbying of immigrant groups that, among other
things, included tearful testimony during congressional hearings of would-be displaced immigrants. The second factor is the lobbying of state governors who feared that states would be forced to pick up the tab for immigrants. Finally, President Clinton played a big part in negotiating for this change as part of the overall budget bill. This was consistent with his promise when he signed the Welfare Reform Act (Freedberg, 1997).

Taking all these factors that influenced policy-making, the Federal Budget Bill was signed by the President on August 5, 1997, restoring SSI benefits to legal immigrants. This allows legal immigrants who were receiving SSI payments on August 22, 1996, to continue to receive SSI payments, provided that all other factors of eligibility continue to be met. It also provides SSI eligibility for most legal immigrants who were in the country on or before August 22, 1996, and were not receiving SSI at that time, but who consequently became disabled. In addition, refugees will be eligible for seven years, instead of five under the old law. (Hopfensperger, 1997) Although this revised law continues to make recent and future immigrants ineligible for SSI and eliminates age as a category for immigrant eligibility, 500,000 disabled
and elderly immigrants were spared from being disqualified. (Cheng, 1997). Nevertheless, this does not discount the fact that although the law was eventually changed, this resulted in negative consequences among the immigrants who faced the threat of losing their benefits.

Several opinions support the exclusion of legal immigrants from public assistance programs. Among these opinions, some cite the overwhelming financial burden of supporting non-citizens. (Ling-ling, 1997; Ling-ling, 1995). Others believe that family members that petitioned the immigrants should be responsible for their needs (Rodgers, 1996). Others agree that immigrants should be discouraged from coming to this country because they create job competition with those already there. This, it is argued, increases the already high unemployment figures. (Borjas, 1995; Ling-ling, 1995). Others have the common perception that the immigrant community does not pay enough taxes. They appear to believe that the rest of the members of society make the contribution for them (Borjas, 1995).

On the other side of the debate are those who oppose reforms that target legal immigrants. First, they believe that immigrants are productive instead of being burdens, and contribute greatly to the economy through their skills,
talent, labor, taxes, and consumption (Simon, 1996; Weiner, 1996; Munoz, 1995; Berger, 1995). Immigrants are believed to be enriching the culture because they tend to have a higher level of education, employment, intact families and law-abidance. (Abraham, 1996; Munoz, 1995). Others also oppose this aspect of the law, based on moral obligation or human responsibility. They believe that this law unfairly and disproportionately hurts a vulnerable group. (Capital Times Editor, 1997; Fix, 1994)

It is likewise reasoned that immigrants are being used as scapegoats by lawmakers and politicians, in order to avoid more complex societal and economic problems. (Mahoney, 1996) Finally, others believe that restricting benefits from legal immigrants is simply shifting the cost to state and local governments and private social agencies and therefore does not really serve as a cost-saving device. (Tim, 1996; Fix, 1994)

In light of this debate, it is necessary to put into perspective what social work is. Social work is a helping and empowering profession in which vulnerable groups find support and understanding. Therefore, the aspects of the welfare reform which negatively affects these vulnerable groups is relevant for study in this field. Social work
enables and stimulates people toward change, so the role of social work practice in social reform is one of action to promote change. Catalyzing change which results to better situations for the immigrants who could have lost eligibility and who may have been at risk of similar discrimination policies in the future to SSI is this study's main objective.

Historically, social work practice has been directly related to the empowerment of oppressed and abused groups. Therefore it must play an active role in this new reform which is based on racism and discrimination, particularly against immigrants. Again, social work practice needs to act more aggressively in order to bring human perspective to social policies. Consequently, it was hoped that this study would find alternative ways to provide services, to identify needs and resources in the community. The inquiry was aimed at bringing to light many varied needs and critically exploring the issues brought about by welfare reform.

Clearly, there are different opinions regarding cuts in legal immigrant benefit programs. It is clear that there is a high level of controversy on this issue. In doing this study, it pointed out that this reform law is a
product of discrimination. It intended to show the connection of this policy to the history of immigrants in this country, particularly of their oppression by the holders of power. It also intended to explore the impact of this law on immigrants who would have been displaced had the original laws prevailed. Therefore, the data collected were used to raise the consciousness of the immigrants' issues and to facilitate the provision of better services.
Immigrants in the USA have had a long history of oppression. Negative feelings and policies against immigrants have been present throughout America's past. True to Purcell's (1995) observations, this cycle is closely tied to economic issues: when there is a shortage of labor, immigrants are welcome; when jobs are scarce, immigrants are excluded. "There is also a cycle of Americans blaming the most recent immigrants for problems such that when a particular group has established itself, it considers the next group as less worthy" (Purcell, 1995). The following discussion of the history of immigration policies and the subsequent treatment of immigration groups illustrate these trends.

The first naturalization laws in 1790 granted citizenship only to "free white persons" after 2 years of residency. Other policies to limit immigration followed, such as a proposal of a $20 tax on certificates of naturalization, extending the waiting period to 14 years, and the Alien Friends Act granting the President the power to deport aliens. After the Revolution, there was a short-lived great burst of nationalistic sentiment that embraced
the oppressed (essentially immigrants). During the Civil War, many immigrants fought for the Union creating a new measure of acceptance for immigrants. There also has been a stimulation of immigration after wars or during intervals of peace when labor is needed. Between 1815-1860, states actively recruited immigrants mostly from northern and western Europe to meet the demands of the massive expansion of the economy. The "Bracero" program in 1942 to bring Mexican workers and the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1996 that provided amnesty to illegal aliens had much to do with serving the interests of business and land owners.

Not long after the Civil War, many anti-immigration and discriminatory laws were created, most notable of which are the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and a quota system to control immigration from southern and eastern Europe and to exclude all Asians. This quota system reflected how Congress discriminatorily regarded each nation of origin. This approach was used until the 1960s and still "lurks in the background of American policy" (Purcell, 1995). These restrictive laws were the result of nativism which is a "virulent, often violent, paranoid and irrational fear of immigrants" (Purcell, 1995).
Purcell (1995) observed that "when times are bad, certain segments of the population express their anxieties on immigrants" and the latter become the convenient scapegoats of officials. The economic depressions of the 1970s and the 1930s and the recession in the 1980s led to more repressive and discriminatory measures against immigrants. With the present economic problems it is not a surprise to see measures such as Proposition 187 which attack aliens and anti-Affirmative Action policies. Michigan Senator Simpson's defeated anti-immigration bill and Pat Buchanan's campaign to end immigration are but a few of the most recent indications of anti-immigrant sentiments.

Different immigrant groups have their own experiences of oppression. The early European immigrants' difficult experiences are those of indentured servants who toiled amidst exploitation and poverty.

The African-Americans' long history of oppression started with their forced immigration into this country to become slaves lacked even the minimum standards of humanity (Purcell, 1995). Up to the present, even though they have achieved significant gains, their descendants continue to be socially and economically disenfranchised.
During the 19th century, the worst received were the Chinese who were discriminated against, physically attacked, and, with the Chinese Exclusion Act, were finally excluded. Their experiences influenced the reception of Japanese, Koreans, Filipinos, Asian Indians, and later on Southeast Asian refugees that included discrimination and racially based restriction. One significant aspect of the Japanese immigrants' history is their forced placement in internment camps during the war with Japan. Despite the advancement of Asians, they still face backlash in the universities and many are still being exploited in low-paying jobs in an underground economy.

Different Latin immigrant groups have faced discrimination in various forms. For example, after the war with Mexico, many Mexicans found themselves "foreigners in their own land" (Takaki, 1993). During the second half of the 20th century, their massive immigration was permitted out of the need for cheap, unskilled, and farm labor. However, they were nevertheless subjected to racist attitudes, exploitation, and manipulation by landowners and businessmen. When Mexicans are not needed, they are subjected to round-ups and deportations. And just as the other minority groups, discrimination is still evident when
looking at their socio-economic conditions. Many other immigrant groups such as the Irish and Jews also became targets of American nativistic hostility.

All throughout US history, social workers have been involved in the alleviation of the poor conditions and the empowerment of immigrants, although the level and arena utilized may have varied depending on different periods. The emergence of the social work profession in the late 1800s is in great part a "response to the needs of a rapidly expanding and poverty-stricken immigrant population" (Day, 1989). The charity organization societies and the settlement houses targeted immigrant clients. In the 1930s, as a result of the economic conditions, social workers moved toward collective political action to improve the poor's condition (Leighninger, 1987). The creation and administration of New Deal programs were greatly influenced by social workers. In the 1960s, racism and other inequities were among those which social workers worked to counteract. Up to the present, social workers are involved in various activities in the policy, community, and direct practice levels that benefit immigrants. The works of NASW, for
example, reflect the profession's commitment in empowering oppressed groups that include immigrants.

The Welfare Reform Law that excludes benefits to legal immigrants is another indication of the long history of discrimination and oppression against immigrants. It is consistent with the cycle of punitive reactions against immigrants that is exacerbated during economic hardship. Ultimately, these actions serve to perpetuate the status quo and to maintain the power in the hands of a white majority.
Out of this perspective, the researchers chose to utilize the Critical Theory paradigm in studying the effects of Welfare Reform to legal immigrants who faced the threat of losing SSI benefits. Although the law was revised and they were spared of the cut-off, it was assumed that the immigrants suffered unnecessary consequences which this study wants to explore.

Critical Theory paradigm was used because it incorporates and allows an ideological underpinning and a critique of the inequities that exists in our society. It was an alternative to the other paradigms that seek neutrality. In contrast, this paradigm aims for restitution for those identified as victims of oppression. It includes an action plan which should "seek to develop and maintain social and personal interactions that are non-exploitative and enhance the social and emotional lives of all people who participate" (Stringer, 1996).

Consistent with the action plan, the researchers assumed different roles. Some of the roles are: as catalysts and stimulators for change, "enablers" for the people's analysis for their own issues and courses of
action, and helpers in the implementation of the people's plans by raising issues and locating resources. These roles were primarily carried out in the policy arena by stimulating the immigrants in the study to participate in actions designed to call attention to their situations. Some of these actions they chose are petition writing, publicizing their stories or staging public demonstrations.

These roles were necessary in light of the explicit needs of the participants. The participating immigrants needed help in raising their consciousness to the historical basis of this welfare reform law particularly connecting this to the long series of oppression to which they have been subjected and the reasons behind it. They needed to be empowered by their exposure to some alternative courses of action that they can take to change this law or mitigate its effects.

The overarching research question that this study wanted to answer was why were the immigrants originally excluded from receiving SSI through Welfare Reform? As previously indicated, the working hypothesis was that immigrants would have been excluded because of the oppression of racism, particularly of immigrants. As a result of this oppressive policy, although it did not
eventually materialize, the immigrants were nevertheless negatively affected in various ways, i.e. medically, emotionally, and mentally. The subsequent question that was the focus of this study was what action was needed to address this oppression? The study's answer for this was that the immigrants need to be empowered to become engaged in action to change their negative situation as a result of "welfare reform". Suffice to say this was the purpose of the study. As to how this purpose was going to be achieved, the researchers posed queries related to their understanding of the historical discrimination of immigrants. Queries that point to the effects of this policy and to the presence of resource gaps were utilized. In the process, the participants were introduced to the availability of other services. Lastly, questions were posed to point out what actions they may take to prevent similar laws and policies and, in general, the discrimination of immigrants.

The speculation that the study would reveal negative impacts on the part of the threatened immigrants was expected to contribute to the evaluation of social work practice. In the policy level, it was hoped that it would point to the oppressive character of the original Welfare
Reform law that in turn directs the need of preventing similar laws in the future which brings negative consequences to vulnerable populations. It intended to illustrate how such laws contain flaws in terms of human sufferings and financial costs associated with increased institutionalization, aggravation of physical and mental problems and other emergency services. It was hoped that the study would express the message that more aggressive political action is needed to influence policy-making. The findings were believed to lead social workers to identify and create services and resources in the community. It was hoped that it would also precipitate a more active involvement in the community not only of social workers but also of the clients. In direct practice, consistent with social work's consideration of "person in environment", the findings were intended to direct future social work research and further inquiry, not only about the issues brought by welfare reform but of the persistent injustices in this society. Ultimately, in any arena, the speculated findings of the study were expected to put emphasis on the clients' need to be empowered to create change in their situation.
METHODS

1. Purpose and design of the study

This research project examined and explored the negative impact that Welfare Reform had on the immigrant population who faced the threat of losing their SSI benefits. The study used a Critical Theory paradigm and its design was qualitative. A Critical Theory paradigm implies the necessity of an action plan during the process of doing this study. Hence the study’s purpose or plan of action was to promote change that can benefit the immigrants. This was done by educating and raising their consciousness about their historical experiences of oppression and racism and by empowering them to take action. It was also done by facilitating topics during the interview that served the above purposes.

The research questions were: How were SSI immigrants affected by the threat(s) of the original Welfare Reform? How are these experiences related to the historical oppression of immigrants? What can they do to promote change? The hypotheses were: that the threat of Welfare Reform affected them negatively in various ways, i.e. medically, emotionally, mentally, and socially; that the
findings would indicate that this new law is just another form of oppression which immigrants have been subjected to throughout their history; and that immigrants can and should be empowered to look at ways they can improve their situations such as exploring other services and undertaking political actions.

2. Sampling

The sample was primarily drawn from a mental health/family services agency that provides outpatient therapy and/or counseling and a day treatment group to a primarily Latino clientele. The method of sampling used was non-probabilistic. It employed a purposive sampling in that our sample was first identified by one of the researchers who had previously worked with them and had knowledge of whom among these clients could have lost their SSI as a result of the Welfare Reform law. The final sample was selected according to the researchers' judgment. The basis of their judgment followed "intensity sampling" such that the cases chosen were more or less intense but not to the point where they become extreme or deviant. The cases that were selected were based on the researcher's personal and professional judgments that they were
adversely affected by the Welfare Reform Law. This was in line with the study’s ideological underpinning of the presence of oppression, which in turn justified the need for action and change. Fifteen SSI adult immigrant clients were planned to be interviewed, and they were mostly receiving mental health services, particularly Adult Day Treatment services.

3. Data Collection and Instruments

Data were collected by interviewing the immigrants at the mental agency from where they are currently receiving services. Each participant was interviewed individually at his or her own convenient time and as authorized by the agency. The researchers utilized guide lists that included topics and issues of interest, and had flexibility in sequencing and wording to allow probing into responses. The basic questions that guided the interview can be found in appendix A. These questions served the purposes of having the participants analyze their experiences, relate them to the historical oppression of immigrants and empower and facilitate their actions to mitigate their conditions.
Some community resource materials were provided during the interview process.

In addition, the researchers took written notes of the main and important points and observations. The note taking was useful to phase the interview, show attentiveness, summarize key issues, and reflect on what was being said. Although it was intended that the interviews were going to be tape-recorded to get a more complete recording of the data, this did not materialize when all the subjects expressed discomfort with the use of the recorders.

One of the strengths of using interviews with guide topics, instead of structured questions, was its flexibility. It allowed latitude and creativity in modifying the questions depending on what other perspectives and changes emerged during the course of the study. This in-depth interview combined with the researchers' observations, took into account the complete social context of the subjects in the study, and gave a more holistic understanding of their issues. The ability to make clarifications and re-checking from the participants strengthened the validity of the data-collection method. Finally, a significant strength of the
interview questions/topics as an instrument was that it was not only useful in eliciting data, but was also a major instrument in serving the study's purpose of raising consciousness and providing empowerment.

One limitation in the data-collection was that some of the subjects, due to some cognitive and mental impairment were not able to articulate their ideas and participate in the discussions fully.

4. Procedure

The data-gathering methods were those that generated qualitative information. One way this was done was through the researchers' direct observation of the participants during the interview process. The main method used was using open-ended, semi-structured, and in-depth interviews with the participants. Two student researchers, both bilingual Spanish speakers, conducted the interview at a mental agency. Each participant was interviewed only once and each interview took approximately an hour to an hour and a half. The process of collecting data occurred during Winter Quarter, 1998.

5. Protection of Human Subjects
The researchers protected the confidentiality of the participants by not revealing their names and other particular information about them throughout the study and in the write-up of the findings. The participants received explanations of what participation was expected from them. The general purposes of the study were explained to them. They were assured that their identity were confidential and that their participation in this study was totally voluntary and they were free to terminate it at any time during the study without penalty. Furthermore, their information that they provided was held in strict confidence. It was emphasized to them that their participation would not affect the services they were and going to receive and were not going to affect their application for U.S. citizenship. All these protection measures can be further exemplified in the informed consent form found in appendix B.
RESULTS

1. Analysis Procedures

Data analysis used a quantitative method in analyzing demographics. In the analysis of demographics, the sample’s composition as far the percentage of the sample belonging to categories of ethnicity or race, gender, ages, and types of disability are provided. Since the sample was small (15 participants), the demographic analysis was done manually. This kind of analysis was done simply for the purpose of providing the general characteristics of those interviewed.

Otherwise, the bulk of analysis for this research used qualitative procedures. The analysis followed the basics of Grounded Theory procedures and techniques as laid out by Strauss and Corbin (1990). Specifically, analysis was done through the use of open and axial coding methods.

Open coding is the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing and categorizing data. In this process, similar events and incidents were labeled and grouped to form categories. These categories were developed in terms of their attributes and characteristics, or their properties. These properties
were further broken down into its dimensions or its location along a continuum. (Strauss & Corbin, 1990)

After open coding, another set of procedures that are more focused were utilized. This involved the process of making connections between the categories and between categories and their sub-categories. Each category was developed by taking into account its causal conditions, dimensional location, context, action/interactional strategies, and consequences. This process is what Strauss and Corbin (19910) called axial coding.

The preceding coding methods were further operationalized in this study by following Brewer and Hunter’s (1989) three steps which are unitizing, categorizing, and member checking. Since in this kind of qualitative study, the methods and analysis phases are closely interwoven or done simultaneously, these three steps occurred during the course of the data-gathering. Only some refinements or integration of the analysis occurred after the formal data-gathering phase.

Analysis started after the data were obtained from the interview process. Handwritten notes from the interview were organized according to the source and with notations of the source and date of the interview. The researchers’
observations from each interview, in a form of a journal were written down again with notations of the source and date of the observation. A copy of each of the notes from the interview and journal were photocopied and cut up commencing the stop of unitizing. In this step, discrete units of information small enough to be understood by themselves were identified and later served as the basis for defining categories. Each unit of information identified was recorded on a five by seven index card, attaching the cut-up portion of the interview or journal where the unit of information was derived from. Additionally, at the back of each index card, the identifying information, such as the source and date of interview and the type of respondent, was coded. Coding this information protected the participants' confidentiality and was useful for audit purposes.

The next step involved categorizing the data. The purpose was to bring together into tentative categories the index cards developed during the unitizing process based on discrete units of information which contents seem related with each other. This step involved the use of constant comparison method but with the following steps outlined by Brewer and Hunter (1989): In a random order, one card was
selected, reviewed, and used as the first entry in categorizing data. A second card was picked and reviewed, and then the researchers determined if this second card's content was similar to that of the first card. If the content seemed similar to the previous one, then they were put together. If the second card seemed different, then the second card was separated and represented another category. Each subsequent card was then analyzed for similar or divergent contents and stacked according to whether it belonged to an already existing category or to a new category. In doing this determination, the researchers used their judgments based on intuitive grounds with their perception of "feel-alike" or "look-alike" properties.

The next step was categorizing these units of information. When new categories or all the data were exhausted, or when the cards accumulated into piles, the researchers then started delineating the properties that define each category. The researchers recorded memos containing the rules set for each category in terms of their properties or specific qualities. Thereafter, the category was named in a manner that it encompassed these properties. Each card was then reviewed and assigned to a specified category on the basis of its fit to the rule(s)
devised for each category. Decisions of whether to include
or exclude some of earlier units of information were done
to accomplish integration. After classifying the
categories, they were reviewed for overlap and for possible
relationships among them.

In order to find out if the categories were accurate
in depicting the respondents' constructions, the third
step, which was member-checking, was done. The respondents
were asked to review the categorization product and to
provide their reactions and feedback to them.

The end of the analysis section was dictated by the
exhaustion of the sources of data, mainly based on the
number of samples specified in the study. At this point,
the final determination of the categories, sub-categories,
their properties, and dimensions had been set.

In formulating the analytic procedure for this study,
some of the possible findings were considered. The diagram
below illustrates some of these presumptive findings:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATEGORY</th>
<th>PROPERTY</th>
<th>DIMENSION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Isolation</td>
<td>light------deep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discrimination</td>
<td>mild------severe</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Assimilation slow-----fast
Depression mild----severe
Services Need small----great
Financial Problem small------big
Family Support adequate-inadequate

2. WELFARE REFORM EFFECTS

Emotional light-----deep
Mental mild----severe
Social small------big

3. RESOURCE AVAILABILITY

Family adequate-inadequate
Community small-----many
Government none------many

4. EMPOWERING ACTIONS

Public Testimony small-----many
Public Demonstration rare-frequent
Letter Writing small-----many
Publicizing seldom---often

2. Demographics
Fifteen participants were interviewed. Nine of the participants were male and five were female. Six of them were married and the rest were single. Four of the participants were in their twenty’s, five in their thirty’s, three in their forty’s and three are in their fifty’s. Sixty seven percent of the participants had been diagnosed with schizophrenia and the rest with depressive disorder. Almost all of the participants were taking psychotropic medications but were stable enough to attend the Day Treatment Program. Nine of those interviewed were from Mexico, four from Cuba, one from Guatemala and another one from an unspecified Latin country.

3. Findings

Reported experiences as immigrants

When the participants were asked about what it means to be an immigrant for them, they generally drew their responses from their significant experiences as immigrants. Overwhelmingly, they described their experiences as generally pleasant. The majority of them attributed this to the role their family played, either in the form of family support and help or of their chance to be reunited with their family. Some talked about the friendships
they have acquired in this country. Almost all of them showed appreciation to the social services that they have been able to receive such as health and mental care and monetary benefits. In addition, they talked about having being able to work and go to school in the past. All the participants from Cuba expressed gratitude for finding peace in this country. Generally, the participants' appreciation of their positive experiences were generated by comparing them to what experiences and opportunities they had received from their country of origin before their immigration.

Despite their overall report of their experiences as pleasant, the participants also mentioned some of the difficulties they have had in this country which are related to their immigration. Three talked about feeling isolated, primarily because of the absence of family members. One talked about the difficulties involved in dealing with the immigration office and another talked about the constraints of being undocumented at first. Five talked about the difficulty of not speaking English and of navigating some of the social agencies. In most part, they talked about specific problems related to their mental illnesses.
It is interesting that at the particular point of the interview wherein their experiences were being discussed, no one talked about experiences related to discrimination or any difficulty related to institutional or societal constraints.

**Reported effects of the original Welfare Reform**

Most of the reported effects of the law were emotional and mental in nature. The three reported consequences of the old law that cut across all of the participants' experiences were pre-occupation, fear and sadness. They talked about the point when they were anticipating the end of their SSI as very difficult. Some talked about worrying about survival issues, loss of their health and mental services and deportation. The majority reported an aggravation of their mental problem symptoms, i.e., increased sleep disturbance, lower appetite, greater feelings of isolation, more suicidal ideation, increased hallucinations and a need for an increased dosage in their medications. Others talked about constant headaches and aggravation of their medical problems such as high blood pressure and diabetes. One talked about internalizing more negative self-concept and self-blame due to the law.
Another talked about feeling very angry but did not know who to point his anger at.

When asked what they did at that time or how they coped, most of the women talked about crying all the time. One talked about how she prayed constantly. Most of them pursued their U.S. citizenship applications, which involved significant paper work, legal assistance and difficulties associated with language barriers. One went to an adult school to be able to pass her citizenship exam and another actively went looking for a job despite his limitations. In all of these activities, they all reported missing some of their Day Treatment sessions or mental health appointments as a result.

Perceived reasons why original law was created

When the participants were asked why the original law was enacted, three of them attributed this to economic reasons. They thought that the government was already spending a lot for social services and that cutting their SSI off was one way to save money. They also talked about overpopulation and that this was a means to discourage further immigration. Two participants saw this law as a government's way to encourage people to become American citizens.
Four participants regarded the reasons behind the law on a more personal level. One saw this law as one way to make his life even more difficult. Two of them thought that this was a way to intimidate them personally and one thought that some people might want him to leave the country. Two of the participants stated that they did not have any idea on the reasons behind Welfare Reform, specifically with regards to immigrants.

Significantly, four of the participants attributed the reasons behind this law to discrimination and racism. At this point of the interview, their experiences as immigrants and the effects of the law had been explored. Although these particular participants talked about discrimination specific to this law only, they stopped short of discussing a pattern of discrimination or its historical basis.

Perceived reasons on why law was amended

When asked what they think were the reasons why the law was amended, thereby allowing them to continue receiving S.S.I., three admitted not knowing the reasons. One simply thought that this was but just natural, i.e., laws change. Another participant opined that the lawmakers must have realized the negative consequences of this law in
terms of human sufferings and therefore decided to change
the law. The majority, however, attributed the change to
the events that followed after the law was enacted. These
events were in the form of written petitions, appeals filed
and people uniting and rallying.

Perceived similarities with and differences from
immigrants

All of the participants, except one, could not
pinpoint any differences between their experiences and
those of other immigrant groups. One particular
participant degraded another Latin group coming from a
country different from his.

The majority saw their similarities with other
immigrants in terms of their personal experiences and
circumstances, i.e., those related to their struggles with
their mental illnesses, having their family as significant
support and for some who do not have family, their bouts
with isolation. The majority of them also regarded the
general goodness of their experiences as probably similar
to those of other immigrants. Only one, at this point of
the interview, mentioned experiences of discrimination as a
common thread among immigrants.

Reported resource needs
The participants identified a number of resources that they needed. These were help with the following:

- transacting with the immigration office (U.S. citizenship applications; petitioning relatives to immigrate or refugee filings);
- learning English or dealing with the language barrier;
- navigating social service agencies;
- acquiring more financial assistance;
- acquiring or improving their board and care, health or mental care and obtaining expanded transportation services. They were almost in unison in desiring employment opportunities that could accommodate their disabilities. This included their identified need for rehabilitative services and skill training.

**Actions elicited**

When explored with the participants possible ways to improve their general situations, several intentions and solutions emerged. At least two of them resolved to pursue their U.S. citizenship. Many of them realized that they need to get more educated on social laws and policies. One took the idea of going back to school seriously. Many of them decided to obtain other resources that were available to them. This intention was made possible as a result of the discussions of their resource needs and also after a resource list had been handed to each of them. For those
two who, by the time of the interview had acquired their U.S. citizenship, they emphasized the importance of voting. Unfortunately however, twenty seven percent had no idea what they could do to improve their situations.

When the discussions centered on what possible actions the participants could take to prevent enactment of laws that are disadvantageous for them, several ideas emerged. Again, many of them intended to acquire their U.S. citizenship so that they could vote on major laws. Almost half mentioned the need to participate in protest actions and in uniting with other immigrants in these activities. Some also realized the need to get more educated on laws and policies.

When it came to the question of how they could improve the treatment of immigrants, the participants had a hard time coming up with solutions. The majority of them simply admitted that they did not know while the rest expressed pessimism and helplessness.

Perceived advocates and adversaries

When asked who they saw as their advocates, several persons and agencies came up. Most of them regarded personal entities such as their families, friends and country-mates as advocates. Some mentioned the Social
Security Office, a particular adult school and the Catholic Church. Many of them recognized Supervisor Gloria Molina as an advocate.

Although many of the participants could not identify any adversaries other than some personal acquaintances, most politicians, U. S. citizens and welfare agencies were mentioned. Governor Wilson's name also came up a number of times.
DISCUSSION

As hypothesized by the researchers, the participants suffered emotional, psychological and medical consequences as a result of the threat of losing their benefits. The study served to normalize the negative feelings, thoughts and experiences that they had gone through and may also do the same for others who may have suffered the same fate. The study also acknowledged the participants' inherent strength and coping skills, which they manifested at that particular time when they were dealing with the threat of losing their S.S.I. At the same time, the study emphasized to the participants that indeed there were negative consequences so that they see the need to take action. Most importantly, highlighting these effects should show the policy-makers that what transpired is not simply a matter of changing laws but is something that is concretely affecting the lives of many people. It is hoped that knowing about the effects of such unnecessary policies will caution the people in power to consider the policy's toll on human suffering and not only in terms of financial costs.
The participants perceived their experiences as immigrants as generally pleasant. This was an opportunity to recognize the value of their gratitude, optimism and positive attitude. It was also an opportunity to point out the adaptive skills and resources which they had utilized in the past and could potentially use in the future. However, it was also very important to point out that their negative experiences, whether as an indirect or direct result of racism, must not be minimized or overlooked. They needed to realize that no matter what treatment or experiences they have had from their country of origin, they should not settle for anything less than what other groups are receiving and must strive for improvements in their situations. They also needed to see that their experiences may have been the result of or at least complicated by societal factors. This helps them deviate from thinking that their negative experiences are simply the results of their individual pathologies.

Improving their situations inevitably calls for their involvement. When the participants were encouraged to consider what actions they could undertake to improve their situations, indeed some came up with relevant ideas. The study empowered the participants to carry out these
actions, provided them concrete opportunities to implement them and, especially for those who had difficulty coming up with views, it provided more options that they may further consider. The study should serve the same purposes for other immigrants.

The study also helped to identify the resource needs of the participants that may possibly be applicable to other immigrants. This identification should help community groups and social agencies to create programs or if they are already available, to create better outreach efforts.

As far as ways that the participants can prevent discriminatory laws from happening in the future, and to improve the treatment of immigrants in general, the study pointed out the need for more education on their part. As the study had intended to accomplish, it helped in educating the participants of the historical basis of racism. The pattern of past discriminatory actions was introduced, and the similarity of their experiences with other immigrant groups was discussed. This was deviating from their original conception of individualizing their own experiences instead of seeing their similarity with those of other immigrants'. In this manner, it is hoped that the
study results in them, and any other immigrant, realizing the necessity of uniting with other immigrant groups.

The study helped in making them understand more about Welfare Reform, the realities behind its creation, its consequent amendment and what may be in store in the future. It clarified their misconceptions on the reasons this law was enacted and consequently for some, it minimized internalizing negative self-concepts as a result of this law. They in a sense, by the end of the interviews, received a better understanding of who may be their potential allies and historically their adversaries—a clear improvement from originally vague ideas of who their advocates and adversaries are. Having this knowledge would result in sounder judgment on who they can coalesce with, who they can derive support from and who they can support for during elections. The study accomplished many things in enlightening the immigrants about the realities of racism. However, it is very clear that more efforts are needed in this direction especially in the aspect of empowering them to take actions. It is hoped that this study will encourage more practitioners and researchers to take actions that critically consider and confront societal barriers.
APPENDIX A: Interview guide questions

Consciousness-raising questions

1. What was being an immigrant meant for you and your family?
2. What are your significant experiences as an immigrant?
3. The Welfare Reform Act was originally going to disqualify you from receiving SSI. How did the original law or the prospect of losing your benefits affect you?
4. Why do you think this original law was enacted in the first place? Why do you think it was amended?
5. How do you think your experiences are similar to and/or different from those of immigrants in the past? And of those in the future?

Action Questions

6. Have you thought of what resources are available to you? How are you going to access them?
7. What can you do to improve your situation?
8. What should you be doing to prevent the enactment of laws that may be affecting you negatively?
9. How else can you improve the treatment immigrants are receiving?
10. Who do you see as your advocates and adversaries?
APPENDIX B: Informed Consent

The study in which you are going to participate is designed to examine your experiences as an immigrant and those related to the effects of the Welfare Reform that was originally going to disqualify you from receiving SSI. In this study, you will be asked to share your experiences, concerns, and opinions. Your information will be held strictly confidential and at no time will your identity be revealed to anyone other than to the identified researchers. Please understand that your participation in this study is totally voluntary and you are free to terminate it any time without any penalty. Your participation will not affect any of the services you are receiving and particularly will not affect your immigration status. This study has been approved by the University Institutional Review Board. Should you have any questions, you may contact Dr. McCaslin, the research advisor, at (909) 880-5507.

I acknowledge that I have been informed of and understand the nature and purpose of this study and I freely consent
to participate. I acknowledge that I am at least 18 years of age.

Participant’s signature

Date
APPENDIX C: Debriefing Statement

This study's goals are to raise the participants' consciousness and empower them to take action. It also aims to educate the participants on issues such as discrimination, oppression, etc. The study also intends to identify available resources for the participants.

California State University, San Bernardino and the researchers conducting this study have a responsibility of ensuring that participation in any research sponsored by the University causes no harm or injury to its participants. However, in case of an unintentional consequence resulting from the participation in this study, services such as provision of or referral for counseling, are available and provided by the University to address their issues.

Any questions or concerns regarding this study or its findings may be directed to Dr. McCaslin, the research advisor, at (909) 880-5507.
REFERENCES


