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Abstract

Immigrants are vital members of U.S. society and are essential contributors to the U.S. labor force. Today, immigrants comprise a significant portion of the U.S. population, however, career assessment research has largely ignored their work experiences, and career counselors are not trained on the intricacies on the delivery of career counseling and assessment services with this population. In this article, the authors provide an overview of current immigration patterns in the United States. In addition, the authors evaluate the current state of vocational psychology research with U.S. immigrants and provide suggestions for future vocational research and practice with immigrants and professional training for career counselors in this area.

Keywords

immigrants, career development, career assessment, foreign born population

Career counseling's origins trace back to the late 1800s and early 1900s when the United States was shifting from an agricultural to an industrial society (Pope, 2000; Zytowski, 2001). This period was characterized by the development of new technologies, increasing demand for industry workers, shifting migration to urban settings, and increasing rates of immigrant newcomers in the United States. These early immigrants helped to shape the United States that we know today (Diner, 2008). Together, these societal shifts gave rise to the practice and study of vocational counseling and assessment, originating with Frank Parsons' work on preparing immigrant youth for work (Blustein, 2006; O'Brien, 2001; Zytowski, 2001). Many of the societal conditions, such as immigration and social inequalities, which were present in the early part of the 20th century continue today (DeBell, 2001; Savickas & Baker, 2005). However vocational psychology has been criticized for straying from one of the core values from which the field is rooted: practice with immigrants and

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other marginalized groups in society (Blustein, 2006). Recently, scholars (Hartung & Blustein, 2002; Savickas & Baker, 2005) have argued that the revitalization of vocational psychology depends on the profession's ability to respond to today's social forces and trends. We issue a call to the field to return to our roots and to expand career counseling assessment, practice, and research with today's immigrants, many of whom come to the United States, seeking work opportunities. In this article, we provide a brief overview of existing immigration patterns, evaluate the current state of vocational psychology research with immigrants, and provide suggestions for future vocational research and practice with immigrants and professional training for career counselors in this area.

Current Immigration Trends and U.S. Immigrant Characteristics

Immigrants have always been an important labor source in the United States, and trends suggest that they continue to comprise a significant segment of the U.S. workforce. Immigrants play a critical role in this country's economy, with certain sectors of the industry relying heavily on their employment. During the earliest waves of immigration, the foreign-born population rose from 9.7% (2.2 million) in 1850 to 11.6% (14.2 million) in 1930, and immigrants hailed largely from European countries (Gibson & Jung, 2006). Immigration rates declined between 1930 and 1970, but have steadily increased since this time. In 2006, foreign-born individuals comprised 12.5% of the U.S. population, or 3.9 million people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008).

The origins of immigrants in the United States have changed significantly since the initial waves of immigration. While early immigrants were of European descent, today's immigrants come from diverse backgrounds and nationalities, including Latin American (53.1%) and Asian (27.3%) countries (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). In contrast to the early waves of immigration when no single country accounted for more than 15% of the U.S. immigrant population, Mexico is by far the largest source of immigrants to the U.S. today (29.8%), followed by China (5.2%), Philippines (4.5%), and India (4.3%; U.S. Census Bureau, 2009).

The foreign-born population represents 15.7% of the U.S. labor force and is older, less likely to graduate from high school, more likely to speak a language other than English at home, and more likely to live in poverty than the native-born population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). See Table 1 for characteristics of the U.S. foreign-born population today. When looking at these statistics for Mexican-born immigrants alone, some striking disparities begin to emerge in areas that are likely to both affect and be affected by one's work and employment. Specifically, immigration patterns are shifting, with women immigrating at higher rates compared to men. Mexican immigrants tend to be younger, have lower levels of education, lower incomes, larger households, and higher poverty rates in comparison to their foreign-born (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009) and native-born peers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). In addition, Mexican immigrants are more likely to be in the labor force and to work in low-skilled, physically demanding, and low-paying jobs than their immigrant and native-born counterparts (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008).

As the foreign-born population has increased, we have also witnessed a rise in anti-immigration policies and negative attitudes toward immigrants (Yakushko, 2009). For instance, Arizona's immigration law, SB 1070, was passed and went into effect in 2010. SB 1070 expands authority to local and state law enforcement agencies to enforce immigration law—practices that in the past have been reserved for federal agencies. Among other things, this law mandates that law enforcement agents inquire about a person's immigration status during lawful stops and allows them to detain individuals who they believe does not have the proper documents to be in the United States. Furthermore, English-only legislation, which requires that all government documents are written in English, has also been passed in several states and local municipalities. These policies may create a chilly or hostile work climate for foreign-born immigrants and may make their adaptation process more difficult as they are transitioning to life in a new country.

Table 1. U.S. Foreign-Born Population Characteristics

	Foreign-Born
Total population	37,960,935 (12.5%)
Gender	
Male	50.1%
Female	49.9%
Age	
18 years and older	92.6%
21 years and older	89.5%
62 years and older	15.1%
65 years and older	12.3%
Educational attainment (25 and over)	
Less than high school diploma	32.5%
High school graduate/GED	21.9%
Some college or associate's degree	18.5%
Bachelor's degree	16.1%
Graduate or professional degree	11%
Language spoken at home	
English only	15.6%
Language other than English	84.4%
English language proficiency	
Speak English less than "very well"	52.1%
Employment status (16 and over)	
In labor force	68.9%
Occupation	
Management, professional and related occupations	28.1%
Service occupations	23.4%
Sales and office occupations	18%
Farming, fishing, and forestry occupations	1.9%
Construction, extraction, maintenance and repair occupations	12.5%
Production, transportation, and material moving occupations	16.1%

Note. Data obtained from the 2008 American Community Survey, U.S. Census Bureau.

In summary, the number of foreign-born immigrants living in the United States today has dramatically increased in recent decades and they constitute a significant portion of the U.S. labor force. Among the foreign-born population, immigrants from Latin American countries, Mexico in particular, represent the largest immigrant group today. Immigrants may lack the human, social, and economic capitals to access work, and the hostilities toward immigrants and immigration can play a significant role in their adjustment to living in the United States. Increased knowledge about the vocational patterns and work transitions among U.S. immigrants can inform career counseling practice and assessment with this group.

Status of Vocational Psychology Research With Immigrants

To evaluate the current state of knowledge on immigrants' career development, we conducted an analysis of publications in four career journals: *Journal of Career Assessment*, *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *Career Development Quarterly*, and *Journal of Career Development*. We limited our search to articles published between 1990 and September 2010, excluding editorials and introductions to special issues. To qualify as an immigrant career article, the primary focus of the article

needed to address the career concerns or career assessment of immigrants or include a foreign-born sample living in the United States.

Scholarship on immigrant workers is timely and has important implications for vocational psychology theory and practice. Unfortunately, relatively little research has been published in our professional journals to inform us about immigrants' conceptions of work and career, their experiences seeking work and in the workplace, and the goals they aspire to at work. Our review of the literature indicates that empirical knowledge about this group's career experiences in the United States is sparse and strikingly underdeveloped; we located 35 studies on immigrants' career development across all articles published in the four career-related journals ($n = 2,731$), representing 0.01% of all articles during the 20-year period that we reviewed. The breakdown of U.S. immigrant articles by journals ranged from less than 0.01% (1 of 1087 in *Journal of Vocational Behavior*) to 0.05% (6 of 130 in *Journal of Career Assessment*). As a whole, foreign-born immigrant career concerns represent a group of workers that is noticeably missing in contemporary vocational research. Although immigrants comprise a significant portion of the U.S. population today, they are as invisible in the literature as they are in society.

As a profession, if vocational psychology can reconnect with our roots in working with foreign-born immigrants in the United States, our science can make important contributions in understanding the immigrant experience in the world of work and our practice can be guided by this research. Like others (Bhagat & London, 1999; Lopes, 2006; Yakushko, 2009), we recommend that more vocational research be conducted with immigrant workers.

Future Directions for Training, Research, and Practice With Immigrant Populations

Career Counselor Training

A critical consideration for career counselors working with immigrant clients is the importance of the counselors' self-reflection of their assumptions, biases, and lack of knowledge in immigrant issues. It is imperative to understand that the immigrant population is comprised of diverse individuals of different national origin, socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, religion, education, occupation, and age. Career counselors are encouraged to explore and immerse themselves into the local immigrant communities to understand unique strengths and barriers presented by members of the community. Career counselors also should assess and reflect on their own culturally bound assumptions and biases toward immigrants (Yakushko, Backhaus, Watson, Ngaruiya, & Gonzalez, 2008). To ensure that one's biases are not interfering with the quality of service, career counselors can seek consultation or supervision from colleagues or community leaders with knowledge about the immigrant culture.

Career service providers should receive multicultural training adhering to the Guidelines on Multicultural Education, Training, Research, Practice, and Organizational Change for Psychologists (American Psychological Association, 2003). Culturally relevant career counseling training should include knowledge and experiential activities to enhance service providers' awareness and knowledge of their culture of origin, as well as their immigrant clients' cultural values, norms, and practice. In addition, career counselors can benefit from training on organizational development and system change to develop skills to advocate for policies that can support immigrant workers during their transition to the United States.

As suggested by the Coping Across Cultural Context Model (Hsieh, Chiao, Heppner, & Zhao, 2008), service providers should be trained to be strength finders, cultural brokers, and career coaches to identify immigrant clients' transferable skills and unlearned new skills, to bridge the cultural gap and to help immigrants adjust to a new job or career in the new cultural context. Since language

skills are key tools to use in cross-cultural communication, service providers are encouraged to have multilingual capacity and to provide services in clients' native languages. If services cannot be provided in clients' native languages, at minimum, service providers should be trained to know how to work with trained interpreters.

Training programs should include immigrant issues in the curriculum, such as the stages of migration and cultural belief systems, and seek to develop practicum training opportunities for students in community immigration and refugee centers. Programs can seek feedback on training materials related to immigrant issues so that students are learning about specific cultural norms and practices and the work-related issues faced by members of the community. Community consultants can provide feedback on service activities so that students can tailor their delivery of job and career-related information. Finally, students need training on designing creative ways to provide community outreach program, establishing relationships with key members of the community, and connecting with other service agencies as these skills can be vital to their success with immigrants.

Career Counseling Research

The immigrant population in the United States is comprised of people with diverse cultures and backgrounds. Increased research in the career development of immigrants is needed to shed light on the strengths and challenges faced by newcomers to the United States in their career search process. Each immigrant community is unique and diverse across multiple variables, and researchers should caution against generalizing issues from one immigrant community to another. Researchers should provide specific demographic information about their sample, including age, country of origin, race/ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, length of stay in United States, reasons for immigration, and occupations in United States. Moreover, it is important to incorporate relevant psychological constructs such as behavioral and cognitive dimensions of acculturation and enculturation (Flores, Navarro & Ojeda, 2006; Miller & Kerlow-Myers, 2009; Yakushko, Backhaus et al., 2008), social identities (e.g., racial, ethnic, gender; Flores et al., 2006; Flores, Ramos, & Kanagui, 2010; Helms, 1994; Mpofu & Harley, 2006), cultural values (Flores et al., 2006; Fouad, 1994, 1995), and minority status stress (Yakushko, Backhaus, et al., 2008; Yakushko, Watson, & Thompson, 2008) to understand their roles in the occupational lives of immigrants.

One of the strengths of vocational psychology is the strong foundation in career assessment inventories (Fouad, 2001). To better serve the growing immigrant population and to advance immigrant career research, researchers need to (a) critically review the application of existing career inventories with immigrant clients and (b) develop new career assessments suitable to the work-related needs of immigrants. The majority of the existing career inventories were developed based on constructs that are culturally (personal interests, self-efficacy) or contextually bound (educational barriers), which have the potential to overlook cultural strengths, work beliefs, and decision-making processes that may be functional in a different culture (Subich, 2005; Watson, Duarte, & Glavin, 2005). Researchers can expand our current usage of career assessment instruments by examining the cultural validity of assessment tools when used with immigrant populations. The development of new instruments that have undergone rigorous psychometric testing is essential to the viability and future growth of research with immigrants. Researchers can design instruments that assess those constructs that are relevant to the career decisions and work lives of immigrants and that take into account the work barriers (e.g., language, documentation, transportation) they face. For example, new measures can be designed to assess immigrants' attitudes toward work, work motivations, and meaning of work.

Vocational psychology researchers are encouraged to use qualitative methodologies to capture the depth and complexity of immigrants' work experiences. In addition, vocational psychologists can develop interdisciplinary teams to examine immigrants' work experiences that include

economic, psychological, and community perspectives. Some recommendations for future investigations in vocational psychology with immigrants include (a) to explore differences in career variables both between (country of origin) and within (gender; generation status) immigrant groups; (b) to examine the validity of key assumptions about career development reflected across the major theories (e.g., work as a reflection of personal interests) in understanding immigrants' career decision making; (c) to explore job search strategies and work experiences of immigrants living in emerging settlement communities; (d) to examine the effects on the family when roles shift as a result of labor force involvement in the United States; (e) to study the career decision making and planning of immigrant children; and (f) to investigate barriers experienced by immigrant workers in specific industries (i.e., construction, hotel and restaurants, agricultural).

Career Counseling Practice

Career assessment with immigrants should be performed in consideration of the cultural context and in recognition of the impact of immigration. Career professionals need to inform themselves of the worldviews of the immigrant communities they are working with to make interpretations that are congruent with the immigrants' perspectives.

When working with immigrants, career counselors gather information about their personal and familial work history in country of origin and in the United States, circumstances for immigrating, acculturation, and language proficiency (Yakushko, Backhaus et al., 2008) to formulate a plan to best serve their needs. Career counselors also need to understand how the immigration process impacted and continues to influence clients' presenting work issues, and to recognize the strength, resilience, and versatility that newcomers demonstrate throughout this process.

To help career counselors to better conceptualize the presenting concerns of their immigrant clients, the initial assessment will need to include additional information that pertains to the clients' immigrant status. Moreover, career counselors not only need to assess clients' current situation in the United States but also gather information about clients' life in their home countries. Understanding the discrepancy between their experiences in the home countries and in the United States helps career counselors to understand clients' aspirations, disappointments, and sense of displacement. Some important factors to assess and consider are:

- **Education:** Immigrants arrive with different educational levels and work experiences. Career counselors need to inform themselves of how the different educational systems compare to the U.S. system. Furthermore, career counselors should find out whether certain degrees are recognized in the United States. This is especially pertinent for clients who were in previous professions with specific educational requirements. For some job positions, prior training or work experiences may be more important than formal education. Defining educational experiences broadly to include prior work may be a useful way to frame their qualifications for a job. Counselors also can assess immigrants' transferable skills that can be applied to future jobs (Chiao, Hsieh, & Zhao, 2009).
- **Language:** Career counselors should be aware of their clients' English proficiencies in order to evaluate the suitable career options for their clients as well as to refer clients to resources for language help. Also, many immigrants come from multilingual countries and their language skills could be beneficial in securing employment.
- **Age and developmental stage:** The career needs and expectations of a young, single immigrant with no previous work experience in her home country are vastly different from an older immigrant who has provided for their family and whose work was interrupted by immigration. The age and developmental needs of immigrants often will influence their perception and expectations about desired occupation and career outlook.

- **Family:** Family members are often impacted by immigration in many ways. For example, some immigrant may move to the United States, while the rest of the family remains in the country of origin or the whole family move together as a unit. For certain cultural groups, the decision to immigrate to the United States could be driven by the interests of one's immediate and extended family. Therefore, the ability to provide for family is an important factor in the career development of immigrants. Sometimes, immigrant clients also experience stress with the shifting of family structure due to the reliance on children for language brokering (Morales & Yakushko, 2010).
- **Social, cultural, and capital supports:** Immigrants are settling in all regions across the United States. Some areas may have existing, established immigrant or ethnic communities that can provide social and cultural support to buffer the stress of being in a new country. Other immigrants may settle in communities with limited or emerging communities that offer few opportunities for connections to other immigrants or few resources/services to assist immigrant newcomers. Furthermore, depending on their lives in the home countries, immigrants vary in the degree of financial supports they have to help them settle into their new life in the United States. The varying degrees of social, cultural, and capital supports available to immigrant clients are likely to influence their coping strategies and stressors related to career development.

Career counselors can serve an invaluable role by serving as a cultural broker for their immigrant clients to the U.S. workplace. Career counselors are encouraged to reflect on their own cultural norms and practices as well as knowledge of U.S. society so they can help immigrant clients decode the cultural context in the U.S. workplace and society. For example, career counselors can inform immigrants about the job application process (written applications, interviews, negotiations; Yakushko, Backhaus et al., 2008), workers' rights in the United States, and the role of networking in locating work. Immigrant workers deal with issues of exploitation, and career counselors can address systems of oppression in the United States and should educate immigrants about their basic human rights. Career counselors are encouraged to think of each interaction with their immigrant clients as educational orientation to U.S. workplace culture. Each of these interactions and exchanges can provide a wealth of cultural information about the United States that facilitates immigrant clients' familiarity with the U.S. labor system.

To create career outreach programs for foreign-born members in the community, career practitioners need to develop a comprehensive picture of the community. Providing any type of community services involves getting acquainted with people and learning about existing resources in the community. As mentioned earlier, the work-related needs of immigrants may differ across communities due to individual factors, geographical location, and environmental factors, and these communities may operate according to different norms and structures. Therefore, career counselors who are providing services to this community perform a needs and resource assessment of the community prior to the design of programs to gain an understanding of the audience and the relevant contextual factors. For example, career counselors can meet senior leaders and learn the following about the immigrant community: common career challenges among members, social and career resources, help referral systems, cultural values, norms, culturally appropriate practice, as well as how information flows in and out of this community. By gathering this pertinent information, career counselors can customize programs according to community members' needs, cultural values and practice, and information systems. Depending on contexts, consultants may find that an established, long-standing community has rich resources and that there are a variety of people within the community that the career practitioner can refer the client to for additional support in addressing their work concerns.

Career service providers can also earn trust from community leaders and members during their ongoing assessment of the community needs and the outcomes of the services that they are

providing. Thus, successful service providers will stay in close communication with the community and will provide regular updates on their services to maintain a constant feedback loop and to make modifications to their services. Career practitioners who are interested in expanding their practice to local immigrant communities might consider the following services:

1. Provide handouts on the job search process in simple language and include contact information for community resources. At the same time, literacy issues may limit immigrants who have access to written information, so other modes of transmitting job information should also be utilized (i.e., presentations at schools, church, etc.).
2. Collaborate with local immigrant services or vocational school to provide career skill building workshops (e.g., job search process, resume writing, interview skills, U.S. workplace culture) infused with English language classes.
3. Entrepreneurship is a career option that offers immigrants autonomy in the U.S. economy. In fact, more foreign-born immigrants than native-born individuals are self-employed, business owners (7.5% vs. 6.6%; U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Career counselors can provide informational sessions tailored to an immigrant audience about the process of owning a small business and can serve as referral point for immigrant clients to receive appropriate information and services from banking and legal agencies.
4. Hire bilingual career counselors to serve clients from particular communities. Recruit and train paraprofessionals to serve as liaisons between career services and the immigrant community. This could establish reciprocal relationships by providing employment opportunities for the community.
5. Establish connections with a variety of social service agencies in the community that can assist immigrants in their settlement and adjustment, such as immigration offices, legal services, domestic violence centers, and community centers.

Conclusion

The key to successful research and practice with U.S. immigrants is building egalitarian partnerships. When career practitioners establish partnerships with community leaders and immigrant members, advertising for career services and other programs can be integrated into the ongoing assessment and data collection process. As the community recognizes that the career service agent is trustworthy, serves their needs, and brings valuable resources to the community, community leaders and members will be more willingly to participate in research, utilize services, and refer people for services.

In conclusion, the need for engaging in and producing more quality, rigorous studies of the work and career patterns of foreign-born immigrants and providing culturally competent career services for immigrant workers has never been greater than it is today. With the unprecedented number of immigrants in the United States today, many of whom come specifically for work opportunities, vocational psychologists have the training and skills to be able to assist members of this group to seek employment that meets their needs and goals.

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