

Social Integration of Latin-American Immigrants in Spain: the Influence of the Community Context

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The main goal of this study is to analyze the degree to which several community elements such as insecurity, discrimination and informal community support might have an influence on the social integration of Latin-American immigrants, a group at risk of social exclusion in Spain. Multivariate linear regression analyses results showed that informal community support is positively related to social integration whereas insecurity is negatively related. The statistical relationship between discrimination and social integration disappears once levels of informal community support are taken into account. A better understanding of the factors that either promote or inhibit the social integration progress of immigrant population is important to orientate public policies and intervention programs that contribute to the adaptation of this population to the host society.

Keywords: social integration, insecurity, discrimination, informal community support, Latin-American immigrants.

El objetivo de este estudio es analizar en qué medida diferentes elementos del contexto comunitario como la inseguridad, la discriminación y el apoyo informal, pueden influenciar el proceso de integración social de los inmigrantes latinoamericanos en España, un grupo en riesgo de exclusión social. Los resultados del análisis de regresión lineal multivariado muestran que el apoyo comunitario informal se relaciona positivamente con la integración social mientras la inseguridad lo hace de forma negativa. Por otra parte, la relación estadística entre discriminación e integración social desaparece una vez que son tenidos en cuenta los niveles de apoyo comunitario informal. Un mayor entendimiento de los factores que promueven o dificultan el proceso de integración social de la población inmigrante es imprescindible para orientar políticas públicas y programas de intervención eficaces que contribuyan a la adaptación de esta población a la sociedad receptora.

Palabras clave: integración social, inseguridad, discriminación, apoyo comunitario informal, inmigrantes latinoamericanos.

Support for this research was provided by the Spanish Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia (SEJ2006-08666/PSIC), the Government of the Principado de Asturias (PCTI 2006-2009), and the Universidad de Oviedo and Banco Santander (UNOV-11-MBSAN-04).

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Immigrant population, when compared to native population, tend to undergo more precarious circumstances (Castles, Rogers, Vasta, & Vertovec, 2003) that usually result in lower levels of social integration (Gracia, Herrero, Lila, & Fuente, 2010). Social integration, as it has been suggested, refers to the perception of belongingness and feeling that one is part of a larger structure, as well as the feeling of interdependence that is maintained by supporting or being supported with others (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Sarason, 1974).

There is vast empirical evidence about the positive effects of social integration in both health and well-being (Cohen, Gottlieb, & Underwood, 2000; Cowen, 2000; Herrero & Gracia, 2007a; Turner & Turner, 1999; Umberson, 1987). These effects have been observed with immigrant population (Herrero, Fuente, & Gracia, 2011; Herrero, Gracia, Fuente, & Lila, 2012; Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001). For Cohen et al. (2000), a possible reason why social integration promotes health is because socially integrated people have better quality of social interactions and more diverse support resources to call on when under stress.

The literature has underlined the vulnerability of immigrant population to psychological distress, due probably to the stressful characteristics of the migratory process (Cuellar, Bastida, & Braccio, 2004; Noh & Avison, 1996; Wilmoth & Chen, 2003). Given that social integration could play a significant role on the adaptation of immigrant population to the host societies (Shen & Takeuchi, 2001; Vega, Kolody, Valle, & Weir, 1991), understanding those factors that may promote or hamper this process becomes an important research area that require more attention by social scientists.

Present study

The aim of the present study is to analyze possible influences of the community context on social integration of Latin-American population in Spain. Specifically, we focus on three variables (insecurity, discrimination and informal community support) that examine different aspects of community context such as level of perceived risk in the neighbourhood, attitudes of native residents toward immigrant residents and support social relationships that may occur in the community. In sum, this study takes into account different sides of the community context that, on the basis of available literature, may influence the social integration process of immigrant population.

Sense of danger and insecurity in the neighbourhood could make residents to be afraid of taking an active role in their communities and to retire of the community life (Ross & Jang, 2000; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997; Taylor & Shumaker, 1990). Furthermore, it has been considered that immigrant population, specially the newcomers, tend to seek low-rent neighbourhoods which

are often deprived residential areas (Castels et al., 2003), that is, neighbourhoods where social problems intensify and generate sense of danger, insecurity and mistrust, finally affecting the community life of residents (Ross, Mirowsky, & Pribesh, 2001).

Studies that analyze insecurity and immigration deal usually with the native perceptions of insecurity attributed to immigrant population (Bigo, 2001; Huysmans, 2000; Quassoli, 2001). Insecurity, threat and fear attributed to immigrant population are common research issues in most of available surveys and reports (Herreros & Criado, 2009; Quassoli, 2004; Zapata-Barrero, 2009; Zick, Pettigrew, & Wagner, 2008) and have been used to explain the important levels of immigrant discrimination in the host societies. This may, in turn, influence the social integration process of this population as it is discussed below. However, researches interested in the perceived security of immigrant population are scant. As Berry (2001) pointed out, the studies that take into account the opinions and views of immigrant population are the exception. The present study analyzes a less frequently studied matter in the literature: the insecurity perceived by immigrants and its relation to their levels of social integration.

Discrimination toward immigrants is a widespread phenomenon in Europe (Zick et al., 2008), and according to the available literature, with negative effects on their well-being and adaptation to the host societies (Jasinskaja-Lahti, Liebkind, & Perhoniemi, 2006; Safi, 2010; Sellers, Caldwell, Schmeelk-Cone, & Zimmerman, 2003; Slonim-Nevo, Mirsky, Rubinstein, & Nauck, 2009; Vega & Rumbaut, 1991; Verkuyten, 2008). Rather than discrimination of the host society at large toward immigrants, in this study we analyze the influence that discrimination in the community might have on social integration. Thus, the study focuses specifically in the community context and its influence on immigrant social integration.

Beyond the negative factors that may hamper the social integration process of immigrant population to the host societies, there are available resources in the community that may promote a better social integration as well. In this sense, and according to available results, social support is one of the most important variables related to the social integration process of immigrant population (Morrison, Laughlin, San Miguel, Smith, & Widerman, 1997; Schwarzer, Hahn, & Schröder, 1994). The study of social support, however, has traditionally focused on intimate and confidant relationships, paying less attention to broader contexts that may involve an important source of support (Adelman, Parks, & Albrecht, 1987; Felton & Shinn, 1992; Lin, Dean, & Ensel, 1986).

As it has frequently been reported, immigrants undergo significant losses of close and stable support resources that remain in their home countries (Morrison et al., 1997; Schwarzer et al., 1994; Vega et al., 1991). In this study, we are interested in the relationships that occur in the community to analyze to what extent these relationships may involve an

alternative source of support that promote the social integration process of immigrant population. This kind of support covers a wide range of potential supports that go beyond primary social networks (family and intimate relationships) and may represent an important instrumental value facilitating the access to resources and information not accessible through intimate and confidant relationships (Granovetter, 1973). In this sense, social support from the close social networks might not allow immigrants deal with problems in important areas (especially for the newcomers): job, legal assistance, housing, etc. (Hernández, Alonso-Morillejo, & Pozo, 2006). In this study we analyze the specific role of informal community support, that is, the support that refers to the social and community organizations (sports, cultural, immigrant, political, labour unions, etc.) as potential resources that might promote social integration of immigrant population.

Drawing from these ideas, we hypothesize that perception of insecurity and discrimination in the community will be negatively related to the perceived social integration whereas the availability of informal social support sources in the community will be positively related to the perceived social integration among Latin-American immigrants.

Method

Participants

For this study we used data from 407 Latin-American immigrants living in Spain, one of the main destinations for Latin-American immigration in Europe. Currently, immigrant population represents about 10% of the population in Spain, of which 30% come from Latin America (Observatorio Permanente de la Inmigración, 2010). Participants were identified following a two-step process. In the first step, researchers contacted non-governmental organizations and other associations that worked with Latin-American immigrants in different activities: from legal assistance to spare-time activities. In this step, we explained the main aims of the study to the staff personnel of different organizations and invited their members to participate in the study. Around 20 organizations collaborated on the study facilitating the access to participants of more than 30 localities of two regions in Spain (Valencia and Asturias). In the second step, self-administered questionnaires were given to those who agreed to participate in the study with instructions to return them once completed.

Variables

Dependent variable

Social integration in the community. We used a short version of the Social Integration in the Community Scale

from the Perceived Community Support Questionnaire (PCSQ, Herrero & Gracia, 2007a). This 3-item version measures the sense of belongingness and/or identification to a community: “*I identified with my community*”, “*My opinions are valued in my community*”, and “*I feel like my community is my own*”. The responses were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from (1) *Strongly disagree* to (5) *Strongly agree*. This variable was computed summing up all responses. Previous studies have shown the adequate psychometric characteristics of this scale (Gracia & Herrero, 2004a, 2004b; Herrero & Gracia, 2007a). Also, its predictive validity has been consistently established (Gracia & Herrero, 2006; Herrero & Gracia, 2007a). Cronbach’s alpha for this study was .71.

Independent variables

Insecurity. To measure the perceived insecurity in the neighbourhood we used an adapted item from the European Social Survey (2007) (www.europeansocialsurvey.org): “*How safe do you feel walking in your neighbourhood after dark?*” Responses categories ranged from (1) *Very safe* to (4) *Very unsafe*.

Discrimination. To measure the perceived discrimination in the neighbourhood we used an adapted item from the European Social Survey (2007) (www.europeansocialsurvey.org): “*Would you describe yourself as being member of a group that is discriminated against in your neighbourhood?*” (1 = *No*, 2 = *Yes*).

Informal community support. We used a 5-item scale that measures the potential support perceived by participants regarding to social and community organizations (sports, cultural, political or labour union associations, residents associations, immigrant associations, NGO’s, etc.). These five items refer to this kind of organizations: “*I could find people that would help me to solve my problems*”, “*I would find someone to listen to me when I feel down*”, “*I would find a source of satisfaction for myself*”, “*I would be able to cheer up and get into a better mood*”, and “*I would relax and easily forget my problems*”. Responses categories ranged from (1) *Strongly disagree* to (5) *Strongly agree* (Herrero & Gracia, 2007a). Alpha’s coefficient was .84.

Control variables

Socio-demographic variables. Distribution of *gender* (1 = *man*, 2 = *woman*) showed higher representation of women (57.7%). The average *age* of participants was 34 years ($M = 33.90$; $SD = 9.90$). *Marital status* was coded: (1) *Not married or not living with a couple*, and (2) *Married or living with a couple*, with 51.6% of participants married or living with a couple. *Education level* was measured with a 4-point scale from (1) *No formal education*, to (4) *University studies*. Participant average education was secondary education ($M = 3.12$; $SD = 0.65$). *Household income* was measured with

Table 1
Means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations of the variables of the study

Variable	M	DT	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)
1. Gender	1.58	.49	—										
2. Age	33.90	9.90	.055	—									
3. Marital status (married)	.52	.50	-.022	.266***	—								
4. Education	3.12	.65	-.016	-.010	.005	—							
5. Household income	3.82	2.10	.003	.127*	.099*	.047	—						
6. Years in Spain	6.56	4.22	-.009	-.213***	-.072	.073	-.257***	—					
7. Depressive mood	14.08	5.06	.192***	.026	-.056	-.117*	-.186***	.076	—				
8. Insecurity	1.98	.62	-.035	-.130**	-.039	.024	-.143**	.035	.082*	—			
9. Discrimination	1.05	.22	-.048	.039	-.041	.027	-.045	.069	.117*	.133**	—		
10. Informal community support	18.05	4.06	.135**	.017	-.016	.036	-.039	.083*	-.003	-.099*	-.145**	—	
11. Social integration	9.89	2.26	.044	.152**	.007	-.041	.094*	-.088*	-.092*	-.242***	-.146**	.234***	—

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 2
Correlates of social integration among Latin-American immigrants in Spain (standardized regression coefficients)

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Socio-demographics					
Gender	.03	.05	.04	.04	.01
Age	.14*	.15*	.12*	.13*	.12*
Marital status (married)	-.04	-.04	-.04	-.05	-.04
Education	-.04	-.05	-.04	-.04	-.05
Household income	.07	.05	.03	.03	.04
Years in Spain	-.04	-.03	-.04	-.03	-.05
Depressive mood		-.10*	-.08	-.07	-.07
Insecurity			-.21***	-.20***	-.18***
Discrimination				-.11*	-.08
Informal community support					.21***
Model R ²	.03	.04	.09	.10	.14
Change in R ²	.03*	.01*	.04***	.01*	.04***

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

an item taken from the European Social Survey (2007) (www.europeansocialsurvey.org) using a 12-point scale from (1) *Less than 1.800 euros per year*, to (12) *More than 120.000 euros per year* ($M = 3.82$; $SD = 2.10$). The average household income was lower than 6.000-12.000 euros/year indicating that most of participants were in the low range of household income. The average *years of residency in Spain* was close to 7 years ($M = 6.56$; $SD = 4.22$).

Depressive mood. We used a 7-item Spanish version of CES-D (Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale) (Herrero & Gracia, 2007b). This version was developed from the previous work of Santor and Coyne (1997) who provided a short 9-item version (see also Herrero & Gracia, 2007b; Herrero & Meneses, 2006) of the original 20-items scale (Radloff, 1977) (e.g., *I felt that I could not shake off the blues, I felt that everything I did was an effort*).

The inclusion of a measure of depressive mood in the analyses allowed to statistically control for potential biases given that, for instance, participants scoring high in depressive mood (probably more pessimistic) could perceive more insecurity and discrimination, and also less informal support and social integration (Schlenker & Britt, 1996). Responses were rated on a 4-point scale from (1) *Rarely or none of the time (less than one day on the last week)* to (4) *Most or all of the time (5-7 days on the last week)*. Alpha's coefficient was .86.

Analyses

We used multivariate linear regression to estimate the relationships between covariates and community social integration. Specifically, we estimated five regression

equations (models) in a nested fashion. The first equation (Model 1) explores the relationships between socio-demographic variables (gender, age, marital status, education, household income, and years of residency in Spain) and community social integration. Model 2 adds depressive mood to equation 1. In Model 3, we included insecurity to estimate its influence on social integration after controlling possible influences of both socio-demographic variables and depressive mood. Model 4 adds discrimination to the previous equation. In the final equation (Model 5) we included informal community support to estimate its effect on community social integration taking into account the role that might play on the relation socio-demographic variables, depressive mood, insecurity and discrimination. Prior to the estimation of models, multicollinearity problems were analyzed to identify potential linear dependence among variables of the study. Level tolerance greater than .94 suggested that no multicollinearity problems existed in our data. Moreover, correlation matrix of variables of the study (see Table 1) indicated a lack of moderate to large zero-order correlations among variables, which also suggested a certain level of independence among them.

Model R^2 and change in R^2 (ΔR^2) were also calculated to estimate the global contribution of each model to the explanation of dependent variable. Results are presented in Table 2.

Results

Results for Model 1 show that socio-demographic characteristics were mostly unrelated to community social integration, with the exception of age, that showed a positive influence on dependent variable ($\beta = .14, p < .05$). Results from Model 1 suggested that, among this group of Latin-American immigrants, most of socio-demographic markers (except for age) were not statistically relevant to understand levels of social integration. This tendency was observed for all the remaining models.

The addition of depressive mood in Model 2 significantly increased Model R^2 ($\Delta R^2 = .01, p < .05$) suggesting that depressive mood had a positive and statistically significant influence on social integration after controlling for socio-demographic variables ($\beta = -.10, p < .05$).

Model 3 added the influence of insecurity on social integration to the equation. The inclusion of this variable increased Model R^2 ($\Delta R^2 = .04, p < .001$) pointing out the negative and statistically significant influence of insecurity on social integration ($\beta = -.10, p < .001$) after controlling for socio-demographic variables.

Model 4 added discrimination to analyze its influence on social integration. The inclusion of this variable increased Model R^2 again ($\Delta R^2 = .01, p < .05$). Results indicated that discrimination was negative and statistically related to social

integration after controlling the effect of the rest of variables of the preceding model ($\beta = -.11, p < .05$).

Finally, Model 5 included informal community support, an addition that significantly increased Model R^2 ($\Delta R^2 = .04, p < .001$). The positive and significant relationship between informal social support and social integration ($\beta = .21, p < .001$) suggested that, beyond the influence of the other variables (socio-demographic characteristics, depressive mood, insecurity, and discrimination), informal community support had a positive effect on social integration. On the other hand, in this final model the negative relationship between insecurity and social integration maintained their statistical significance ($\beta = -.18, p < .001$) while the negative relationship between discrimination and social integration was no longer significant ($\beta = -.08, p > .05$).

Discussion

In this study we analyze the influence of various elements of the community context such as insecurity, discrimination and informal community support on the process of social integration of Latin-American immigrants in Spain. To do this, we statistically controlled for a set of variables that might have an effect on community integration such as depressive mood and socio-demographic characteristics of immigrants (gender, age, marital status, educational background, household income and years of residence in Spain).

Results indicated that most of socio-demographic characteristics were not statistically relevant to understand levels of social integration in participants of the study. The only statistically significant socio-demographic variable was age. Beyond the amount of time immigrants had been living in Spain (an age-related variable), results showed that older participants informed of higher levels of social integration. In other words, younger participants tended to perceive themselves as less socially integrated.

Regarded to depressive mood, results suggested a negative relationship with social integration: the higher depressive mood the lower social integration remains. This result is in accordance with data from general population (Gracia & Herrero, 2004a; Herrero & Gracia, 2007a). This influence of depressive mood on social integration, however, lost its statistical significance once other variables were entered into the equation, which suggests that this influence might be explained by third variables. For instance, some participants of the study may score high in depressive mood due to high levels of discrimination (Hughes & Demo, 1989).

As for the substantive part of our model, results suggested that the relationship of insecurity with social integration was negative and statistically significant once control variables were taken into account. As has been indicated in the literature (see Introduction), sense of danger and insecurity, which is frequent in deprived areas where

immigrant tend to live, might detach immigrants from the community life, a circumstance that, according to our results, could influence their social integration. Results of our study suggest, also, that the negative relationship between insecurity and social integration is unaffected by levels of informal community support. In other words, we cannot completely rule out the possibility that participants with high levels of informal community support scored low social integration if they felt unsafe in their neighborhoods. This finding suggests paying closer attention to the potential sources of perceived insecurity in immigrant population given its negative impact on their levels of social integration.

Discrimination showed a statistically negative relationship with social integration. As some authors have suggested, social attitudes toward immigrant population probably might be reflected in immigrant feelings to the host society (Kalin & Berry, 1996; Robinson, 2009). Thus, if immigrants perceive that the host society hold negative perceptions toward them, this might raise reciprocal negative perceptions in immigrants that lead them to detach from the host society or even maintain hostile attitudes toward it (Jasinskaja-Lahti, Liebkind, & Solheim, 2009). As Schmitt and Branscombe (2002) indicate, immigrant feelings of being discriminated might reinforce the identification with the own ethnic group and weaken ties with the native group. Moreover, perceived discrimination could also negatively affect expectancies and the perception of life opportunities (Safi, 2010), with a detrimental influence on social integration.

When informal community support was taken into account, however, the statistical significance of the relationship between perceived discrimination and social integration was removed. This finding needs further discussion and will be revisited when commenting the results of the final model.

The final model showed that beyond the statistical effects of control variables, insecurity and discrimination, informal community support held a positive and statistically significant relationship with social integration. This result suggests a facilitating effect of informal community support on social integration of participants of the study. Since moving out to a new country is a critical event that might affect the availability of close and intimate relationships of the support network (Morrison et al., 1997; Schwarzer et al., 1994; Vega et al., 1991), to explore the potentialities of the community in rebuilding the support network appears as a fundamental research task. This could offer new insights that allow orientating public policies that foster the effective integration of immigrant population in the host societies.

While most of results of our study were in accordance with the literature on social integration, an unexpected lack of significant relationship between discrimination and social integration was found in our final model. Thus, when informal social support was taken into account, discrimination was no longer associated with social integration. Results

from our study showed, however, that this relationship was close to statistical significance ($p = .08$), which suggests that assuming a greater level of statistical confidence we could maintain a significant relationship between discrimination and social integration. Nevertheless, this lack of statistical relationship between discrimination and social integration requires a more detailed analysis.

We cannot rule out the possibility that some participants of the study scoring high in discrimination could experience, at the same time, a strong feeling of community support. For the most part, participants of the study were members of immigrant associations, which could be important sources of informal community support. Thus, it is possible that informal community support in this study be referred to support from these associations and to other immigrant members of these associations, which, according to the literature, could enhance adaptation to the host society (Fernández-Kelly & Schauflyer, 1994; Portes & Zhou, 1993). Moreover, there is research suggesting that lack of support networks might increase discriminatory experiences (Finch & Vega, 2003; Noh & Kaspar, 2003) which could help to understand the important role that informal community support might play in reducing the negative effects of discrimination on the social integration of immigrants. Although this line of arguments could partly explain the lack of relationship between discrimination and social integration, future research should clarify this point.

Overall, the present study suggests the need to implement new intervention strategies that enhance the availability of resources of informal support that help the process of social integration among immigrant population. Moreover, according to the available literature, immigrant population does not seem to take full advantage of the availability of resources located in the formal support systems, due probably to several circumstances such as difficulties to access information, lack of programs and appropriate services, incompatibility between programs and job demands, perception of ethnical prejudices, etc. (Aroian, Wu, & Tran, 2005; Hernández et al., 2006; Reboloso, Hernández, Fernández, & Cantón, 2003). Thus, institutional support to immigrant associations, for instance, could help to facilitate rebuilding the informal support networks of immigrants that, in turn, could positively contribute to their social integration. This type of collaboration between formal and informal systems of support might help to promote social integration among immigrant population.

Limitations

Results from the present study should be interpreted cautiously due to existing potential limitations. Firstly, participants of the study could not be representative of Latin-American immigrant population in Spain, affecting generalizability of results. Secondly, the correlation nature of our data could limit the analyses between covariates and

dependent variable; other methodological approaches should be implemented to better understand the direction of these relationships. Thirdly, measurement of the variable discrimination is too generic. Future research should better clarify the potential effect that different measures of discrimination would have in the variables under study. Fourthly, it is important to note that our sampling procedure could have had a positive impact on the observed levels of social integration since most of participants were either in contact or collaborating with organizations in their communities, a circumstance often related to higher levels of community integration (Herrero & Gracia, 2007a; Wandersman & Florin, 2000). If our sampling procedure had included more participants not collaborating with organizations in their communities, we probably had found even stronger statistical relationships among variables of the study. Future research with different sampling procedures should clarify this point. Finally, the present study does not differentiate between immigrants and natives sources of support, an issue that should help to better understand the relationships under study in future research.

Conclusion

A deeper understanding of the contextual and community factors that promote (or inhibit) the process of social integration in the community could help to orientate public policies that effectively contribute to the adaptation of immigrant population to the host society. This adaptation is not only valuable for immigrant population but to the host society as a whole.

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Received July 5, 2011

Revision received October 22, 2011

Accepted November 2, 2011