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A Case Study of Personal Experiences of Undocumented Eastern European Immigrants Living in the United States

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Abstract. Existing research on undocumented migration has focused predominantly on Latin American and Mexican immigrants and largely overlooked the experiences of immigrants originating from other parts of the world. As such, very few studies have considered how the lack of legal residency status can influence life opportunities of undocumented immigrants from Eastern Europe. The overarching aim of the present study was to explore the personal experiences of unauthorized Eastern European immigrants in the United States in order to: (a) augment research on undocumented migration, and (b) highlight the experiences of undocumented Eastern Europeans who remain an under-studied group of immigrants. Comprehensive personal interviews were conducted with a small group of unauthorized immigrants to explore: (1) reasons for immigration and prior expectations, and (2) psychosocial experiences (i.e., status related anxiety, experience with prejudice and discrimination, job satisfaction, sense of belonging, family relations, and future plans). Some of the results are presented in terms of similarities and differences between the current study's sample and the undocumented immigrants from other regions of the world, namely, Mexico and Latin America.

Keywords*: Eastern European immigrants, immigrant assimilation, immigrant psychosocial adjustment, migration, undocumented immigrants*

1. Introduction

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact beginning of undocumented Eastern European migration to the United States. However, it is well established that the immigration quotas determined by the laws of 1921, 1924 and 1929, by greatly restricting open Eastern and Southern European immigration (Ngai 2003; Robila 2008; Sadowski-Smith 2008) marked the beginning of a massive flow of unauthorized Eastern European immigrants to the U.S. (Sadowski-Smith 2008). The Eastern

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European emigration then dramatically declined between the Great Depression and World War 2 (Sadowski-Smith 2008) and continued to decline between 1945 and 1991 as Eastern Europe became subject to Soviet control. During this time period, communist authorities exercised restrictive exit policies that severely limited the ability for Eastern Europeans to travel internationally (Robila 2007; Robila 2008). The fall of the Eastern European communist regimes in the late 1980's and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 brought forth a new surge of both legal and illegal Eastern European immigrants into the United States (Robila 2007; Robila 2008; Sadowski-Smith 2008). Due to this influx, the Eastern European-born population in the United States nearly doubled from 1,231,372 in 1990 to 2,171,906 in 2011 (Migration Policy Institute 2013a), representing approximately 5.4% of the total immigrant population in the United States (Migration Policy Institute 2013b).

The Eastern European-born population includes four distinct groups of immigrants: naturalized citizens, legal permanent residents, legal nonimmigrants, and undocumented immigrants, all of whom differ greatly in terms of their rights and privileges (Massey and Bartley 2005). Although it is difficult to determine the exact number of undocumented Eastern European immigrants, reports indicate that there were approximately 300,000 undocumented European natives residing in the U.S. as of January 2011 (Hoefer, Rytina, and Baker 2012).

Despite the increasing number of undocumented Eastern European immigrants in the United States, there is relatively little known about this population (for exceptions see: Gozdziak 1999; Ngai 2003; Sadowski-Smith 2008). Previous research exploring undocumented migration has predominantly examined the struggles and/or everyday experiences of Mexican and Latin American immigrants (e.g., Abrego and Gonzales 2010; Belliveau 2011; Campbell 2008; Cleaveland 2010; Cleaveland and Pierson 2009; Gomberg-Muñoz 2010; Perez et al. 2009; Perez et al. 2010; Sternberg and Barry 2011; Walter, Bourgois, and Loinaz 2004). This research interest may be explained and warranted by the fact that 58% of unauthorized immigrants in the U.S. are Mexican natives and 23% are other Latin American natives (Passel and Cohn 2011). However, an unintended consequence of such research focus can undermine the diversity of the unauthorized immigrant population currently residing in the United States (Rivera-Batiz 2001) and may feed into the stereotypic portrayal of the unauthorized immigrant as a Mexican border crosser (Ngai 2003). Reports indicate that a large percentage, perhaps as many as 45% of the total unauthorized immigrant population, have entered the United States legally and

have become unauthorized residents by overstaying their visas (Pew Hispanic Center 2006). Reports also indicate that visa overstayers and border crossers seem to differ on several dimensions (Rivera-Batiz 2001). For example, on average, visa overstayers compared with border crossers seem to have more years of schooling (11.6 years compared to 7.1 years), are more likely to hold technical or professional jobs (28.2% compared to 8.3%), and have higher family income per person ($9,054 compared to $6,218) (Rivera-Batiz 2001). Furthermore, the socio-demographic make-up of visa overstayers (i.e., educational attainment) seems to be more similar to the U.S. general immigrant population than to the border crossers' population (Rivera-Batiz 2001). These statistics seem to typify the undocumented Eastern European immigrants, the majority of which happen to be visa overstayers (Pew Hispanic Center 2006). A direct comparison of the demographic characteristics of undocumented Latin American and Eastern European immigrants in metropolitan Chicago showed that undocumented Latin Americans experienced higher rates of unemployment and earned lower hourly wages compared with their Eastern European counterparts (Mehta et al. 2002). Furthermore, while securing white-collar jobs presented a challenge for both, Latin American and Eastern European immigrants, undocumented status limited the access to these jobs only for Latin American immigrants (Mehta et al. 2002).

The combined outcome of the research outlined in this paper provides an account of socioeconomic and demographic differences between undocumented Eastern Europeans and Mexican and Latin American immigrants. This work might also suggest that Eastern European natives are less likely to encounter the negative impacts of an undocumented status than Mexicans and Latin Americans or in general non-White immigrants. Undoubtedly race compounds the difficulties experienced by non-White undocumented immigrants. For example, race clearly played a significant role in a series of immigration raids in Chandler Arizona in 1997, where Latino immigrants became the direct target of scrutiny, whereas "persons who passed for white or Black were never questioned about their citizenship or for proof of their immigrant status" (Romero 2008, 147). However, a recent investigation suggests that although the racial makeup of Eastern European immigrants allows them to more easily blend in with the general population of the U.S. and can protect them against ethnic discrimination, these immigrants, nevertheless, experience psychological stress (i.e., fear of deportation) and daily struggles that are similar to the experiences of their Latin American counterparts (Gozdziak 1999).

Although investigators have begun to highlight the heterogeneity of the U.S. immigrant population, they have primarily focused on the demographics and socioeconomic trends associated with each subpopulation within the undocumented immigrant population. As such, in our study, we were interested to further augment the existing research by exploring the relationship between undocumented status and everyday personal experiences of Eastern European immigrants. Our interviews with a small number of undocumented residents enabled us to gather first-hand accounts of the participants' experiences as they tried to work, raise a family and navigate life in their adopted country. Practical difficulties limited our access to a large sample of undocumented immigrants, thereby making it difficult to formulate any inferential conclusions and/or any meaningful comparisons between our sample and other samples of undocumented immigrants. However, when possible, the results are presented in terms of similarities and differences between our sample and undocumented immigrants from other parts of the world, namely, Mexico and Latin America.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

In this study, we refer to all of our participants as Eastern European, although we feel this description needs some clarification. Some of the participants, such as those from Hungary and Slovakia, are technically Central Europeans due to the geographical location of their countries within Europe. However, many Eastern European as well as Central European countries (e.g., Slovakia, Hungary, etc.) remained under the control of the former Soviet Union's communist regime after World War II up until the late 1980's. Due to this shared historical past, we have referred to Central European participants as Eastern European throughout our paper.

In recruiting vulnerable research participants from what is considered to be a hidden population (Faugier and Sargeant 1997; Lahman et al. 2011), we faced crucial methodological issues, including random sampling. We were able to recruit nineteen participants by using snowball sampling as a referral method, where a few initial contacts generated further contacts (Atkinson and Flint 2001; Browne 2005). Previous research provides convincing arguments that when studying hard to reach populations where random assignment is not feasible (Faugier and Sargeant 1997)

and when the aim of the study is exploratory or descriptive (Hendriks and Blanken 1992), snowball sampling presents an acceptable and commonly used non-random technique. Although our non-random sampling design raises issues regarding generalization from our results, this method was congruent with our research goal of investigating a social process (Faugier and Sargeant 1997), in this case the psychosocial experiences of undocumented Eastern European immigrants.

Of the 19 interviews conducted, one of the interviews was discarded because the individual's tourist visa had not yet expired, therefore he couldn't be considered an undocumented immigrant. The other 18 participants included in this study reported being undocumented immigrants. Most of the participants (17) arrived in the United States legally holding either a temporary work or travel visa, but lost their legal status after the expiration of their visas. Only one of the participants arrived in the United States by crossing the U.S.-Mexico border. Our data is in line with previous reports indicating that the majority of undocumented Europeans are visa overstayers (Pew Hispanic Center 2006). Of the 18 participants included in our study, 7 were men and 11 were women, all of whom had immigrated to the United States between 1991 and 2010. Nine participants came from Hungary, 5 from Slovakia, 3 from Poland and 1 from Lithuania. The participants ranged in age between 25 and 40 with a mean age of 34.40 (*SD* = 4.25). Seventeen participants resided in Connecticut and one resided in New Jersey. Eight participants were married, 5 were in a romantic relationship, 4 were single and 1 was divorced. Of those in a marital or romantic relationship, 11 had partners of the same national origin and 9 had either one or two children. All of the children resided with their parents and held either an American or a dual citizenship.

Relevant reports indicate that only a small percentage of Mexican undocumented immigrants establish U.S. bank accounts during their residency in the United States (Amuedo-Dorantes and Bansak 2005). In contrast, all participants in our sample had various forms of bank accounts. In addition, contrary to misconceptions that undocumented immigrants try to avoid paper trails, most (15) of our participants, in addition to bank accounts, held various forms of traceable U.S.-issued identification documents: 11 had U.S.-issued driver's licenses, 10 had tax IDs and 5 had social security cards. Many of our participants also owned various assets in the United States. Fourteen participants owned a car, 2 owned a house, 2 owned income generating businesses and 1 had life insurance. Most participants also currently owned assets in their countries of origin: 6 owned a house, 4 owned income generating properties, 2 owned a car, 2 had a life insurance and 2 had a retirement plan.

2.2 Measures

The survey instruments utilized in this study included an in-person interview and a demographic questionnaire. In depth interviews were chosen as the primary method of research to allow participants the flexibility of describing their personal experiences in their own words. The interview consisted of 45 structured and semi-structured questions organized into the following two themes: (1) reasons for immigration and prior expectations, and (2) everyday personal experiences (i.e., status related anxiety, experience with prejudice and discrimination, job satisfaction, sense of belonging, family relations and future plans). In addition, participants completed a demographic questionnaire containing 69 open ended and multiple-choice questions about educational, family, and employment background.

2.3 Procedure

Participation in this study was voluntary and no tangible incentives were offered. Participants were recruited using snowball sampling. While recruiting participants, we openly stated that we were looking for undocumented Eastern European immigrants. At the beginning of each session, each participant was given a brief explanation of the general purpose of the study and was informed that the interview was being audiotaped for later transcription. In order to protect participants' identity, a written consent was not administered. Instead, the interviewer read the consent form out loud and asked: "Do you agree to participate?" By answering "yes", participants gave consent to take part in the study. This procedure was approved by an Institutional Review Board.

All interviews were conducted in English and the conversations lasted an average of fifty minutes. If a participant did not understand a question, the interviewer paraphrased or clarified the question. After the completion of the interview, participants completed the demographic questionnaire.

3. Results

We focused on two emerging themes while analyzing the results. First, we explored participants' reasons for immigration and prior expectations about life in the U.S. and whether those expectations had been fulfilled. Second, we attempted to examine participants' personal experiences with discrimination or maltreatment,

status-related fear and anxiety, employment background, family relations, sense of belonging and plans for the future. Some of the data are presented in terms of similarities and differences between our sample and undocumented Mexican and Latin American immigrants.

3.1 Reasons for immigration and prior expectations

Even though most participants (17) immigrated with the clear intent of working in the United States, only three arrived with temporary work visas, while the majority (13) entered the United States holding tourist visas. Subsequently, all of these respondents became undocumented by overstaying their tourist or working visas. Only one individual reported crossing the U.S.-Mexico border illegally. Previous research indicates that fleeing poor economic conditions (Cleaveland 2011; Hernandez 2009), reunification with family members (Hernandez 2009), and escaping political turmoil in the country of origin (Chavez 1998) are among the common reasons specified as reasons for migration by Mexican and Latin American immigrants. For our sample of participants, the two most common reasons for choosing the United States as a destination were: (a) to make money (9 participants) and/or (b) to go on an adventure (9 participants). It is not surprising that many of our participants described traveling to the U.S. as exciting and adventurous, since prior to the fall of the communist regimes severe restrictions were imposed on free travel in most Eastern European countries. As a Slovakian participant described:

> "It was forbidden for us [to travel] for a long time. . . . I was very curious. . . I just wanted to come and see."

Most participants (10) had no clear expectations about life in America prior to their arrival and simply came to "explore", "learn English" and "have fun". Others (7) expected to find a better life, but most of them (5) were disappointed to discover the difficulty involved in finding well-paying or meaningful work and obtaining legal residency. This disappointment resonates with the voices of undocumented Mexican women who express the perceived American prosperity as difficult to attain (Campbell 2008). Regardless of previous expectations, all our participants believed that life in the U.S. was at least somewhat easier, in terms of making a living, than life in their countries of origin. They explained that hard work in Eastern Europe did not necessarily translate into a comfortable life style.

> " If you work, if you study. . . you can get your goal easier than in my country. If you study in my country and you want some job, it's so hard to get it." (Slovakia)

> "If, on [sic] Hungary you have a job, you just survive, but here if you have good job and you have good money, you can do things and go further." (Hungary)

> "Financially, you can do a lot better in this country. . . people in my country struggle to travel. . . do not dine outside. . . you know everybody cooks. . . there just isn't enough money to go outside and eat in a restaurant. . . like we do here." (Slovakia)

In contrast, relevant reports indicate that for undocumented Mexican immigrants residing in the United States does not seem to ease socioeconomic difficulties. Some undocumented Mexican immigrants, for example earn low wages in exchange for working long hours and are forced to make personal sacrifices for their family and children (Campbell 2008; Cleaveland 2011).

In our sample, 4 participants stated that they came searching for a better life suggesting that they had originally intended to remain in the U.S. for an indefinite period of time. None of the participants stated that they traveled to the U.S. for the purpose of permanent resettlement.

The majority (12) of participants sampled intended to return to their countries of origin after living and working in the U.S. for a few months up to a maximum of 4 years, whereas the rest had come without any clear plans about their length of stay. However, all of our participants indicated that they stayed longer than they had originally intended because they became accustomed to the life style and/or settled down and established families.

> " I start [sic] to have a life which I never had before. . . I was able to afford to live on my own, have my own TV, have my own room, have my own car, go on vacation around the States." (Hungary)

> "I did the internship program for the 18 months. . . I had friends. . . I was like stay a little bit longer, little bit longer. . . then you have kids and then it's like what are we gonna do?" (Slovakia)

Similarly, Mexican migration to the United States has always been circular in nature until the militarization of the border (Massey, Durand, and Pren 2014). Most undocumented Mexican immigrants have no intentions of permanent settlement in the United States, rather they plan to work, earn money, and in some cases allow their children to complete their schooling before they return to their native land (Campbell 2008; DeLuca, McEwen, and Keim 2010). Many undocumented Mexican and Central American immigrants also report having stayed in the United States due to having adapted to the American life style (Chavez 1991).

Many of our participants (12) stated that they enjoyed the quality of life and high standard of living that the U.S. offered. They reported enjoying the diversity of the United States' population (6), its natural resources and beauty (6) and employment opportunities (6). Overall, the majority of participants (13) were happy with their decision to migrate and those who experienced reservations about their decision to migrate (5) did so primarily due to their inability to obtain legal residency.

3.2 Psychosocial experiences

3.2.1 Status related anxiety

Many everyday tasks such as opening a bank account or getting a driver's license placed the participants at risk of detection and potential deportation. Most of our participants (16) reported stress-related experiences, including daily fear of being detected by authorities, continuous feelings of anxiety and a generalized sense of vigilance or uneasiness.

> "If you are an illegal resident, then it's not easy at all. . . everywhere you go they ask you for the social security number and without the social security number you can do really nothing. So, I'm talking about school, I'm talking about getting like credit for the car. . . even applying for the debit card at the bank." (Poland)

> "You can't drive, you are always under stress. . . someone can pull you over. . . you don't have what is required. . . but you can't really get it." (Poland)

> "When you see the police car. . . your heart starts to beat like ten times faster. . . to think about what can happen when I have my son in the car. . . it's just stressful.'' (Hungary)

> "I remember once someone whispered that there's immigration in town and they are looking for, you know, illegal immigrants. . . I remember the entire restaurant leaving. There was only the manager left and one cook that was legal. All the other employees left. . . that was scary as hell. . . I remember running in the street and changing my clothes, so nobody can see me in black [uniform]." (Poland)

While fear of deportation is a common theme in the accounts of undocumented Mexican and Latin American immigrants as well (Chavez 1998; Simon and DeLey 1984; Sullivan and Rehm 2005), deportation may become a reality more often for Mexican and Latin American immigrants than their Eastern European counterparts (e.g., Romero 2008). Some of our participants were well aware of the difficulties compounded by the influence of race on the lives of undocumented Mexican and Latin American immigrants.

> "I'm a white person, so no one really can tell if I'm legal or not by looking at me. . . if you're driving a car and you're me, no one is gonna suspect that you are illegal. If you look Hispanic, the first thing they are gonna ask is for your identity." (Poland)

3.2.2 Experience with discrimination and/or maltreatment

Most participants (14) have had interactions with the police due to traffic violations or car accidents. The majority (13) evaluated these interactions positively and felt that they were treated fairly by police officers. This is a sharp contrast with the interactions of non-White undocumented immigrants with the law enforcement. Many undocumented Mexicans and Central Americans fear public officials, including police officers who often work in conjunction with immigration authorities. These immigrants avoid calling the police at times of need for fear of repercussions including the very real possibility of deportation (Menjívar and Bejarano 2004).

All participants have had interactions with health care providers and the majority (16) described their overall experience as mostly positive. Only 2 individuals described their experience with health care providers as negative. One was refused services due to lack of insurance and unwillingness to pay in advance of treatment and the other had concerns about unnecessary and costly medical tests ordered by his doctor.

All participants with American-born children received financial assistance from social service agencies in the form of food supplements and/or health insurance for their children. These participants evaluated their experience as positive.

Most participants (15) did not have any interaction with the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). Only 3 participants reported personal interactions with the INS. In one case the participant was pulled over at a checkpoint and after stating that she was not a legal resident, she was allowed to leave without any further consequences. In two other cases, the individuals were trying to change their visa status and described their experience as disappointing or unfair.

Most participants (16) had interactions with educational institutions through ESL classes, college courses or participation in their children's school programs. More than half of these participants (10) reported their experience as positive and were happy with free ESL classes, helpful teachers and small classes. The remaining (6) participants had either mixed or negative comments in terms of their interaction with educational institutions. These individuals viewed the American education

system as less rigorous compared to the European education system. In addition, the high cost of a college education was mentioned as a negative characteristic of higher education in the U.S.

3.2.3 Work experiences

All male participants and 8 of the female participants were gainfully employed. Although some of the participants (8) had two or more years of college education and some (5) had professional training in cosmetology, culinary arts, etc., the majority (12) worked in fields that traditionally employ undocumented workers (i.e., construction, unskilled restaurant work, housekeeping, and babysitting). Only 2 individuals held skilled or semi-skilled jobs (i.e., sales). Seven of these participants expressed that given the opportunity they would most likely further their education, seek vocational training and most of them (13) expressed the desire to change jobs.

> "I have motivation, I wanna do something. . . First you have to learn the language, you have to get used to living over here, then after a while I think every normal people has some kind of motivation to do more." (Hungary)

> "I do have a degree from the business [sic], the hotel management so I might look into that field. . . I don't wanna end up. . . babysitting for another thirty years. . . I would go back to school and start something." (Slovakia)

Limited employment options (i.e., cleaning, farm work, landscaping, babysitting, etc.) was more of a concern than the salary associated with these positions. Furthermore, our participants believed that most Americans would not be interested in the type of hard and low-skilled jobs undocumented immigrants held.

> "You started from scratch. . . . After you get to a point. . . you don't move anywhere. . . you don't improve. . . you just stay the same, doesn't matter if you make money. . . Money doesn't make you happy after a while." (Poland)

> "Americans don't like to go to the fields and do, you know, pick up vegetables or fruits and stuff like that. I work in a restaurant, no American would go to the kitchen or the dishwasher. . . In restaurants you can see American do like server and bartender. . . but wouldn't just cut up the veggies. You don't get that much money for that job and it's not a fun job or a job who [sic] requires any knowledge. . . . You can just step in the kitchen and you can do this, and you not gonna get that much money. . . . The busboys in my restaurant, they get for one full day, starting ten o'clock till ten at night, they get 53 dollars." (Hungary)

Participants also expressed job dissatisfaction due to their inability to open or extend their own businesses (6) and the lack of employment benefits (6).

> "My business is small. . . I don't want to make anything big. . . I don't want to leave everything here." (Hungary)

> "We don't have any benefits. . . We cannot get money from government. . . We are illegal, then we need to work harder. . . sometimes we need to work double hard than the regular Americans." (Slovakia)

3.2.4 Sense of belonging

Most participants (13) believed that they contributed to the social and economic infrastructure of the U.S. society by working, paying taxes, raising children, participating in social and educational events and developing friendships and social connections. Despite this belief, an impeded sense of belonging was a recurring theme throughout the interviews.

Eight of the participants felt they were not a part of U.S. society, didn't belong and used the words "temporary" and "additionally" in self-reference.

> "I feel I don't belong here. . . I'm not an American citizen. . . I don't even have a Green Card. . . I'm here just temporary." (Hungary)

Marginalization and feelings of isolation are major stress factors for undocumented Mexican immigrants as well (Sullivan and Rehm 2005). Legal status is often cited as a major reason for feelings of isolation and detachment from the community by Latin American undocumented immigrants (Chavez 1991).

Ten participants felt that that they were not equal to others due to their very restricted rights, with some expressing that their fundamental human rights to freedom and equality were being violated.

> "We are kind of like locked here. . . We cannot go out, we cannot travel. . . . We cannot enjoy that freedom like everybody talking about [sic]. . . There is a freedom, but not a real freedom." (Slovakia)

> "You are just a nobody here. You have no rights, you have nothing. Anybody can do anything to you. You are not even here, don't even exist." (Hungary)

Due to reported difficulties in obtaining legal status, some participants (5) had already decided to leave the U.S. in the near future, but the remaining individuals did not have any clear future plans. The majority (16) felt that obtaining permanent residency or citizenship would make them at least partly feel more like an American. Five believed that having legal residency would make them feel as if they belonged and would provide further motivation to assimilate. The relationship between being a legal resident and feelings of "belonging" and "citizenship" was

expressed in the following manner:

> "You have the right just as they do. . . . Nobody can mess with you anymore. . . . You are accepted already by the country." (Hungary)
>
> "What can make me American? Truly, just a piece of paper, because in my heart, I am American already." (Slovakia)

3.2.5 Freedom to travel and family relations

All participants (15) who had immediate family members living in their countries of origin kept in touch and as many as 13 reported talking to their family members at least once a week. Seven participants have been visited at least once a year by a family member since their arrival to the U.S., however none of them have been able to visit their country of origin. Even though none of the participants were separated from their children, they nevertheless experienced painful separation from parents and family.

> "I miss my parents and it's really hard on me. . . My mom was here, my dad was not. . . He is not able to make it here. . . . This is the hardest part of it. You want to go so badly and you just cannot go." (Slovakia)
>
> "Basically when you move that far and you can't visit back and forth, they split up family. . . You don't really have foundation here. . . no foundation there anymore." (Hungary)

Negative psychological outcomes of painful separation from children and family members among the undocumented Latino/a parents have been well-documented (Sternberg and Barry 2011; Walter, Bourgois, and Loinaz 2004). Restricted mobility and inability to visit family and children is also a major source of stress and emotional hardship for undocumented Mexican immigrants (Sullivan and Rehm 2005).

3.2.6 Future plans

Finally, we asked our participants about their plans for obtaining legal residency. Four participants were hoping to be sponsored by family members or employers in order to obtain a Green Card. The remaining participants (14) believed that under the current immigration laws, their chances of obtaining legal residency were quite slim. Among these, 11 participants viewed marrying a U.S. citizen as the only option toward legal residency.

> "I could just get married. . . but it's really. . . not working for me. . . . This is not like really me. . . but there is no other way. . . I didn't think about this, but now sometimes I think about that too." (Hungary)

> "Last year we [my husband and I] got divorced, hoping that we can find someone [an American citizen] to marry us. . . . We also talked to the lawyer about. . . the options and at this moment, there is nothing really you can do. . . The only option is to get married." (Poland)

All participants believed that their lives would be much improved if the U.S. government was to institute new immigration laws or policies that allowed illegal immigrants to obtain some form of legal residency or work permit. They believed such laws/policies could generate tax revenues and utilize untapped talents and skills of the undocumented population.

Even though participants emphasized the benefits of legalization, most (17) were not in favor of granting general amnesty to all unauthorized immigrants. They believed that employed and tax-paying immigrants who have been living in the U.S. for some time and those with no prior criminal record and a certain level of education and English proficiency should be given priority for receiving U.S. permanent residency. Most (13) emphasized that drug and human traffickers, those hiding in the U.S. to avoid criminal prosecution in their native countries and individuals who abuse the American social services are harmful to the U.S. socio-economic infrastructure.

4. Discussion

Our study's attempt was to contribute to the existing immigration research by exploring the personal experiences of the unauthorized Eastern European U.S. residents. By highlighting the personal experiences of this under-studied immigrant group, we hoped to highlight the diversity of the U.S. undocumented residents. Adopting a target perspective in studying undocumented immigrants (Lee 2012) enabled us to report first-hand accounts of motivational forces behind migration and psychosocial ramifications of living as undocumented residents.

Our interviews revealed that the majority of the participants in our sample had entered the United States legally, holding a tourist or a work visa. This is in stark contrast with reports of undocumented Mexican immigrants who enter predominantly through crossing the U.S.-Mexico border (Rivera-Batiz 2001). All our participants had entered the United States between 1991 and 2010 after the fall of

the communist regimes to take advantage of their newly-found freedom, mainly to explore America and/or to work temporarily with the intention of returning to their countries of origin within a relatively short period of time. In contrast, economic hardship and family reunification have been reported as some of the main reasons for Mexican migration (Cleaveland 2011; Hernandez 2009). Once in the U.S., most (17) of our participants had allowed their tourist or work visa to expire and had consequently become unauthorized residents. All participants expressed that they remained in the country because they either started a family or experienced a better quality of life in the U.S. compared to their countries of origin. Most participants had at least 12 years of formal education and a small number had college degrees. All participants owned U.S. bank accounts and most had some form of U.S. issued identification card such as a driver's license, tax ID, or social security card. Many of our participants owned assets both in the U.S. and in their countries of origin.

Although most of our participants did not experience any direct form of discrimination or maltreatment while interacting with various institutions, they reported emotional and socioeconomic stress in connection with their residency status. Fear of deportation, limited employment opportunities, inability to travel outside of the United States and impeded sense of belonging were among the most difficult challenges reported. Similar accounts are echoed in Gozdziak's (1999) study showing that although the racial makeup of undocumented Polish immigrants allows them to blend in with the general population of the U.S., these immigrants, nevertheless, experience daily stressors similar to their non-European counterparts, including fear of deportation, uncertainty about the future, and difficulty assimilating into the mainstream culture. Although fear of deportation seems to be a common theme among undocumented immigrants, due to their racial makeup, Eastern Europeans are less targeted by discrimination (Gozdziak 1999) and immigration raids (Romero 2008). Historically, European immigrants have been able to more easily assimilate into the American culture than other non-White immigrant populations (Smart and Smart 1995).

One of the biggest sources of frustration for our participants, especially women, was the realization that their legal status did not allow them the ability to move away from low-skilled employment despite their previous training, education and motivation. Relevant research indicates that Latino immigrants also express "being forced to accept low-paying jobs" and experience difficulties in terms of obtaining "desired employment" and job promotions (Cavazos-Rehg, Zayas, and

Spitznagel 2007, 1130). Low wages did not seem to be a great concern among our sample of participants.

Most of our participants stated that legalization would facilitate socioeconomic and emotional assimilation by allowing them to explore job opportunities more in line with their interests, education and training. Furthermore, similar to Mexican and Central American immigrants (Chavez 1991), our participants indicated that legalization would enable them to feel more as a part of their adopted country and more accepted by their community. Our participants indicated that they experienced major challenges in terms of assimilation into their adopted country. Recent studies suggest that unauthorized immigrants tend to remain marginalized regardless of their willingness to assimilate (Chavez 1991) and can at times encounter what Chavez (2007, 193) calls a "schizophrenic context" of reception, experiencing both inclusion and exclusion in the adopted country. On the one hand, these immigrants develop strong connections to the United States through establishing families, raising their American-born children and working (Chavez 1994) and on the other hand, as described by McGuire and Georges (2003, 191), they have "no official right to exist within the political-legal-geographic boundaries of the country in which they live." They are stripped of many of their basic human rights and neither benefit from nor feel protected by governing laws and policies (De Genova 2002). Most of our participants stated experiencing a peripheral existence and believed that their basic human rights of equality and freedom were ignored. In describing themselves, they used terms such as "temporary", "additionally", or "under" American citizens. This suggests that even though the racial make-up of Eastern European undocumented immigrants may allow them to more easily blend in and/or to be accepted by American society (Gozdziak 1999; Smart and Smart 1995), their race does not provide them with a sense of belonging.

Another major difficulty encountered by undocumented immigrants is reunion with family members (Sullivan and Rehm 2005). For example, many Latino/a immigrants are forced to leave children and spouses behind (Sternberg and Barry 2011; Walter, Bourgois, and Loinaz 2004). Although, none of our participants had to leave behind a spouse or children, most had immediate family members still remaining in their own native countries. The inability to visit family members was reported to have caused strained family relationships.

Finally, many of our participants reported experiencing or having had

experienced chronic stress, as well as sleep-related problems including nightmares, generalized feelings of apprehension and vigilance associated with fear of detection and deportation. For the undocumented immigrant, fear of apprehension and deportation can not only make relatively routine activities like driving to work challenging and precarious (De Genova 2002), but it could also adversely influence the immigrant's cognitive functioning and social and emotional livelihood (Arbona et al. 2010). Lack of legal status can also have far-reaching psychological consequences that have not yet been adequately measured or understood (Sullivan and Rehm 2005). We suggest that research involving focus groups or individual interviews might enable investigators to develop measures and techniques to better understand some of the psychological consequences of undocumented status.

It is difficult to generalize the findings of our study for several reasons. Due to the nature of our research, we were not able to access or randomly select a large number of Eastern Europeans for participation in personal interviews. The participants were recruited from two U.S. states, Connecticut and New Jersey, which does not necessarily render our sample representative of the unauthorized Eastern European population of the U.S. Experiences of unauthorized immigrants in other states (i.e., Alabama, Arizona etc.) may be quite different in comparison to that described by our participants.

In addition, our sample was restricted to subjects who spoke English well enough to be interviewed. Relevant research draws a nexus between lack of fluency in English and lower earnings for both Mexican and non-Mexican unauthorized immigrants (Rivera-Batiz 2001). We suggest that unauthorized immigrants with less English proficiency may face even more difficult circumstances in terms of emotional, social and economic adjustment.

Finally, while there are similarities between the experiences of undocumented immigrants from Eastern Europe and Mexico or Latin America, the added component of race poses an additional challenge for undocumented Latino/a immigrants compared to that of Eastern European immigrants. Undocumented status clearly limits job opportunities, strains family relationships, influences assimilation and results in fear of deportation for all immigrants, but the degree of these effects seem to be different for Eastern European and Latino/a immigrants.

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