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Memories: Cuban-Immigrants and their Courage, Connection, and Adaptation

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the narratives and articulation of experiences of Cubans who left Cuba during the Mariel Boatlift that took place between late April and late September 1980 in response to Fidel Castro's Revolution. Electronically blogged entries were submitted in an attempt for Cuban-American emigrants to seek and share information about their experiences and help them locate the vessels that brought them to America originally (Barry and Rosenblatt, 2010). A Miami Herald database publicized in-depth information on one of the most important events of Cuban emigration. A reporter, data analyst, and Web developer worked for months to digitize and organize little-known data about the 1980 Mariel Boatlift, published to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the vessels' arrivals in the United States. The data sets proved to be more than mere numbers and names. Every record highlights what Cuban emigration means to each individual that is facing loss and embracing a new commitment and a story of change, conflict, and connection that shapes their values, hopes, and dreams as Cuban-Americans. Using the social work strengths perspective and empowerment that uses human strength and resiliency as a tool for helping individuals overcome personal obstacles and challenges, this study explores the process that assists troubled people to realize their full potential through the narrative analysis of 13 blogged representative entries extrapolated from 140 total entries, which included five males and seven females that responded to the 2010-2011 Mariel Boatlift database Miami Herald blog.

Introduction

On April 20, 1980, Cuban President Fidel Castro proclaimed in Havana that any Cuban who wished to immigrate to the United States could board a boat at the nearby port of Mariel. During the ensuing months, some 125,000 Cubans fled to Florida in about 1,700 packed boats, at times overwhelming the U.S. Coast Guard and immigration authorities. Most of the Mariel refugees decided to live in Miami, increasing by 20 percent that city's Cuban working population. Washington and Havana agreed the impromptu exodus would end Oct. 31, 1980 (Glass, 2009). Few studies have examined the Mariel migration experience in the contemporary lives of Cuban-Americans. Pedraza (1996) described the Mariel refugees' lived experiences as being very different compared to previous Cuban migrants in that most were working class and relatively young people who came of age long after the Cuban revolution.

In a prior qualitative research study by Perez (2013), she explored the shared migration memories of Cuban-American emigrants who left Cuba as adolescents or young adults between 1959 and 1979. She asked these older participants, after spending at least 40 + years in America, about their experience of leaving Cuba, focusing on the reciprocal relationship between the socio-political context surrounding their memories of leaving their homeland, as well as the meaning-making impact of those experiences. Perez chose to interview emigrants in areas of New York City and northern New Jersey, away from the Florida epicenter, where 70% of U.S.-based Cubans reside (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012), thinking that a low co-ethnic presence could affect the intensity of memories of the homeland, as well as what would be recalled. The themes that emerged from Perez's study demonstrated a lack of closure regarding leaving Cuba, along with a

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strong sense of psychological presence of that lost homeland. The emerging themes indicated a life-long pattern of ambiguous loss (Perez, 2013). Based on participants' accounts, it was apparent that these older Cuban-Americans kept their homeland psychologically present and had been unable to find closure, which resonated strongly with ambiguous loss (Boss, 2006). Loss is connected to experiences of trauma related to migration among Cubans (Rumbout, 1995) and also among Latino youth (Perreira & Ornelas, 2013). Perreira and Ornelas (2013) found that post-migration experiences of discrimination and neighborhood disorder further exacerbated the risk of experiencing trauma, while social support and familism mitigated it. However, few studies have examined the nuances and meaning-making of Cuban Mariel migrants who were relatively young when they came to the United States. How does this generation grapple with their migration experiences? What are their challenges and how do they express their resilience? Lastly, how is Cuban identity of the Mariel generation created, negotiated, claimed, and remembered long after their migration to the U.S.?

Although Cuban-Americans' shared history and ideological ethos are often described as common to all, they are by no means a homogeneous group (Suarez & Perez, 2011). The Mariel Boatlift Cuban emigrants have been living in America for the past thirty years and have shared a different attitude than the elder Cuban relatives that came to the United States 20 or more years before them, also fleeing the Revolution by Fidel Castro. Through the narrative analysis of the Miami Herald's electronic blog (Barry and Rosenblatt, 2010), this study indicated that people have many strengths and have the capacity to continue to learn, grow, and change (Kirsthardt, 1992), despite the challenges that the Cubans encountered in their decision to leave their homeland during the Mariel Boatlift of 1980. Using the strengths perspective, social workers seek to assess the assets and strengths of people rather than just their needs and challenges. Weick (1992) suggests that an essential assumption of the strengths perspective is that "every person has an inherent power that may be

characterized as life force, transformational capacity, life energy, spirituality, regenerative potential, and healing power... [which] is a potent form of knowledge that can guide personal and social transformation" (p. 24). The empowerment imperative also requires that social workers understand and develop an awareness of the tensions and conflicts that oppress and limit them and help them overcome their constraints in their lives and in their communities (Gutierrez, 1994). Building on prior research on Cuban immigration and incorporation, the article aims at understanding how people come to make meaning of their emigration experience utilizing their resilience and developing connections with others who share the same experience. This qualitative study explored the electronically posted memories of Cuban-American emigrants who left Cuba as children, adolescents, and young adults between April of 1980 and September 1980. These respondents publically shared their thoughts about their experiences of leaving Cuba, focusing on their desire to learn more about the vessel that transported them to America, the captains that navigated their journeys, and the Cubans that chose to leave their homeland that hot summer so long ago.

Methods

This qualitative research uses a narrative approach, and like the name implies, centers on the study of stories or accounts – usually of individuals, but also of groups, societies, and cultures (Reissman, 2008). Embedded in Reissman's approach to narrative analysis using thematic analysis, our study relied on categorizing accounts or aspects of accounts that are being told through a public electronic blog. Narrative studies bring forth the meaning in naturalistic talk through the analyses of conversational exchanges between two or more individuals in which the study respondents may be unrelated, as seen in an electronic blog. The researchers proceeded by examining the study respondents' experiences using textural description, inductive coding from the data, memo writing, and arranging significant statements to themes. The procedures for data

triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) included reading and re-reading the transcriptions of the electronic blog, memo and coding notes, and debriefings with co-researcher, a Cuban-American academic who came to America during the Mariel Boatlift. The analysis focused on what and how bloggers communicated, and memorialized their migration experiences and noted the most salient issues to develop themes. In the notes, descriptions of the environment including conditions of the Cuban camps, boats, American camps, and life in America were examined; the relationships that were left behind, those that existed during the exit from Cuba, and those established in America were examined; and the attitudes toward living in America today were explored.

Recruitment Procedures and Respondents

In this study a purposeful sample strategy was used by gathering and transcribing public electronically blogged entries that were submitted in an attempt for Cuban-American emigrants to seek and share information about their experiences. Also, the blog sought to help them locate the vessels that brought them to America originally and was published in the Miami Herald by Barry and Rosenblatt on May 20, 2010. One hundred and forty electronic entries were retrieved from the internet, and 13 were narrowed down and selected as a representative sample of the cohort to include 5 men and 7 female respondents through the sorting of comparison notes of two researchers seeking to identify rich and emotive responses. The criteria included being a former Cuban having left Cuba as a result of the Revolution, having arrived in America during the 1980 Mariel Boatlift, and responding to a public electronic blog. Procedures did not require the university's institutional review board (IRB) approval since the narratives were from a public domain. No identifiers were used to protect specific identities of the respondents and in order to report the finding in aggregate. There were no contradictory data uncovered in the blogged entries, and a critical examination of bias or influence in the selection of data for presentation

was reduced by the researchers' use of bracketing and triangulation achieved by three researchers reviewing the blogs independently and comparing notes. After the two main researchers read, documented memos, and coded the blogged entries, a third review was conducted by an outside graduate assistant for consultation of bias with reference to the findings. The majority of the blogged entries were limited in describing the Mariel Boatlift experience in detail, and focused more on the search for the ship that brought the immigrants to America or search for others met along on the journey. The chosen entries for analysis concentrated in rich detail on what was experienced and how they felt about the life they left behind in Cuba, what the reasons were for their leaving their original homeland, and their attitudes and thoughts about living in America then and now.

Data Organization, Narrative Approach, and Analysis

Respondents were given numbers that did not reflect their listed order in the public electronic blog to protect their identity despite their public entry. A Spanish-speaking researcher as described previously translated the blogged entries from Spanish-to-English translations. Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) was used as a text analysis software program for the transcripts as designed by Pennebaker, Booth, and Francis (2001). LIWC calculates the degree to which people use different categories of words across a wide array of texts, including emails, speeches, poems, or transcribed daily speech. Microsoft Word was used to organize transcripts, LIWC2007 notes, memos, and subcategories and themes. As researchers we bracketed personal experiences with the subject matter by sharing our thoughts during peer debriefings about the blogged entries. Peer debriefing is the process of exposing oneself to a selected peer in a manner paralleling an analytical session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

The themes that emerged from this study demonstrate the strengths of the Cubans who came to America during the Mariel Boatlift, along with their ability to adapt to a new life in south Florida primarily. These themes indicate that three main attributes were paramount among this cohort, namely courage, connection, and adaptation. We were struck by the emotional response that was triggered by many as indicated in the electronically blogged entries. There is something tremendously moving about experiencing a traumatic event in your life such as fleeing a country due to a revolution, extreme poverty, terrorism, and political differences from your own. The sharing of these stories by this particular Cuban cohort provided affirmation that coming to America required tremendous courage on the part of those who left the country and for those loved ones who stayed behind. Additionally, the connection to one's faith and family was paramount per the respondents' accounts of divine interventions during the ordeal of fleeing the country, traveling in bad weather in sometimes over crowded boats, to come to America to find relatives whom many had never even seen before due to the political divides that existed at the time. Finally, an amazing ability was demonstrated through the narrative of how individuals and their extended family members adapted quickly and successfully to the American culture, despite their love for their homeland and families left behind. This cohort chose to stay and grow in America, the land of the free, and many chanted the "God Bless America" slogan repeatedly. These three main themes are based on respondents' recollections and may be confounded by factors having to do with the passage of time and memory distortion as a result of the lapse of time.

*Theme 1: Courage was Needed to Leave
and to Stay*

The respondents and their families made the difficult decision to leave their country of origin to find freedom and opportunities that were not to

be had in Cuba. Other family members and friends remained behind due to a wide variety of life circumstances to include pregnancies, illness, and the need to be caregivers for others. Most who did leave were legally required to have an American relative waiting to take them into their homes. Others whom Castro did allow to leave were prisoners, physically and mentally ill persons, and those thought to be homosexuals. "Should I go? Or should I stay?" were the choices of the day for many, and provoked the need to face the future with all the courage required to endure the unknown. Fidel Castro's Revolution brought about enormous fear in either circumstance. The communist government affected everyone in Cuba and left little for those staying or leaving in the way of possessions and income. Respondents shared both their fears and acts of courage as they made their way to America. One such quote illustrates the combination of emotions expressed by one blogger:

An incredible feeling, such a mix emotion. The sadness of leaving the country one loves so much, family and friends was almost unbearable, but knowing that a new life awaits ahead full of opportunities, freedom and away from a land destroyed by a murderous dictator made it all worth the agony. I remember the boat slow advance, like a wounded whale trying to reach safety, caring so many life to the promise land, running from a monster who feast on the blood of so many innocents, whom have no choice but to kneel at his presence to worship this devil and corrupt desires. Thank God for the opportunity to be in The Land of the Free and The Home of the Brave.

While another quoted:
Holding my sister with one hand and me with the other, my mom led us out of Polaris on June 4 at Key West. Times were difficult. The phrase "llegar con una mano adelante y otra atras" [arriving with your hand in front of you and the other behind you] applied to everyone. We shared contradicting emotions. We cried

over loved ones. We missed Cuba. I missed my dad! I prayed every day to see him again and thankfully, he joined us in Florida in 1984 after obtaining legal passage through Costa Rica. I can talk about crashing waves, overloaded boats or scarce resources during this journey. Instead, my memory of Mariel is a tribute to my parents. Because of their courage and determination my sister and I enjoy many freedoms and dare to dream. I have read many of the memories on this database and relate to the nostalgia. I join many in hoping someday Cuba will be free. I also relate to the joys and success stories. I am grateful I live in the United States of America. Cuba, however, remains forever in my heart

The Cuban immigrants who came to America on the Mariel Boatlift were courageous in their attempt to seek freedom even at the cost of leaving behind close family ties. One of the strongest values held by the Latino culture is that of close family relationships. Fortunately, most had family members who waited for them in America at this time, and this helped to ease the discomfort of losing other close family members who would be left behind in exchange for freedom and an entirely new way of life.

*Theme 2: Belief in God and Love of Family
Inspired Connection*

The Merriam-Webster dictionary definition of connection is that of a situation in which two or more things have the same cause, origin, and goal. The young children did not question the decisions of their parents. Those who were able to make a decision on their own felt the tug of war between leaving their homeland of Cuba where their faith was practiced and their family and friends were all together. However, the deplorable conditions in Cuba provided little hope for a future except for crushing poverty, possible imprisonment, and no freedom to make any personal choices. Even for those who did leave, there is still the dream that Cuba will one day be a free and democratic society; but for now, that remains a dream. Respondents shared their strong

belief that God was in charge of their journey and protected them from all evil. It was the connection between their faith and their family ties both in Cuba and in America that provided immeasurable support. The first generation to leave Cuba lacked the connection that the second wave of Cubans felt upon reaching the shores of America. The connection between faith and family sustained many survivors as they adapted to the American lifestyle.

The sense of an individual's connection to faith was reflected in the following quotes: First, I want to Thank God for giving the opportunity of being in the best country in the World, I also want to thank my parents for having the courage, and my uncle for putting the funds. I am sooo proud of being an American.

I was a young child (8) and this experience has given me hope and a great outlook in life. You only live once and take all the chances in the world that are given to you by God. My parents took a chance with all of our lives and we all live very productive lives. Thank you to the Captain of this boat and his family for doing such a great deed. Also to all the men and women that processed us Key West, for treating our family like human beings. God Bless all for having Compassion and Mercy.

And finally about the voyage, one respondent stated:

I remember clearly my long and endured journey to the United States. I had just turned eight years of age. The boat was full of people and I remember feeling scared. I was taken into a small room with a bed. I sat my brother on my laps and started singing Christian songs. I was afraid that the boat would sink, but immediately started singing to my Lord. I felt faith in action. My parents were at a different place in the boat and I was just by myself with my brother. I felt that God was the captain of my ship and everything was going to be fine. At times I felt the ship rocking from side to side, but I still managed to keep myself calmed by singing through the whole trip. My aunt

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would come to check up on us. She would inform me on how my parents were doing. Most people were dizzy and nauseated. Finally, we reached Key West. I was exhausted, but extremely happy to finally see my dream come true.

Theme 3: Demonstrated Ability to Survive and Adapt

Most of the respondents on the blog reported that they were grateful to America for providing them refuge at a time when they had to leave their homeland. Each respondent stated they had been able to survive their ordeal in coming to America and had established themselves successfully in their new homeland. Through the process of adapting to a new culture and land, each survivor was able to change to fit some purpose or situation in America that helped them to sustain themselves, and many found that their children were even more successful than their parents had been. The following quote exemplifies the gratitude and adaptation experienced by a blogger:

Wow, I am shocked that after 32 years I came across this name again, the Viking Starship. After 9 days in the Peruvian embassy in Habana, 3 days at "El Mosquito," and a 24-hour bus stop/ride to el Mariel, an eight-year-old girl and her parents walked jumped on this vessel with the hopes of freedom. My last memory of Cuba was standing on the back railing of this ship while my father held me in his arms and all I can recall was tears dropping down my face. My father tried to make me feel better by telling me we will be free, we will be free. All my eight-year-old mind could think about was, how I'd never see this beautiful island again. The place where I was born and the only thing I ever knew was becoming a foreign concept to me even as I stood there. My mother laid a clear pink poke-a-dot raincoat on the floor under a bench inside the ship's cabin and she laid over me to keep me safe from the lunatics onboard. Fast-forward 32 years and I can't thank my parents enough

for their courage. I am a successful philanthropy professional and public servant, with two beautiful children and a loving husband, but best of all, we live in America, the land of the free and the home of the brave. When asked, "Where are you from?" my immediate answer is, I am Cuban-American! There are no question folks, these vessels like the Viking Starship brought us here physically but what really brought us here was the American dream! Live it, love it for it is the core of why we all live in America!

Another tells a similar story of the struggle and gratitude:

I came to the US when I was 9 years old. I really was convinced that this trip was temporary and that soon I would be back home with family. That was 30 years ago and we never went back. I was playing with friends at the end of the block in a small province of Havana. A neighborhood kid came running to tell me the police were at my house. I ran down to see what was happening. The officer was telling my mother that relatives in the US had made arrangements for us to leave the island. If we made a decision to leave, we would be considered traitors and would have to step out of house immediately. I had no idea about the consequences of our decision. I only knew I was excited to leave for the US. I told my mom to say yes, I wanted to go. My mom said yes and we were immediately asked to respond to the local police station that evening. We were not allowed to take anything with us. No photos, no clothes except what we were wearing. All the neighbors were outside the police station for a demonstration against those who were leaving. As our parents boarded the bus that took us to the port, the neighbors hurled eggs and tomatoes at them. We stayed in a camp for one night before boarding the boat to the US. My family in the US met us the next day. It was all very fast. Suddenly I had to learn a new language, make new friends, start a new school, and meet a new family. Overall, I'm glad I came and all the changes I went through made me very appreciative of just

about everything in life.

These Cuban-American bloggers as a cohort demonstrated resiliency in the ability to overcome challenges of all kinds—trauma, tragedy, personal crises, plain ‘ole’ life problems—and bounce back stronger, wiser, and more personally powerful. It’s important because this is what we need to do when faced with life’s inevitable difficulties, and uncontrollable crises such as the Cuban Revolution. The respondents adapted and overcame their difficult journey from Revolutionary Cuba to America and can teach others about perseverance and self-empowerment. Their voices reflect their strength and how a combination of factors carried them to safety and success.

Discussion

The study identified several main themes that reflected the respondents’ strengths and resiliency in facing the unthinkable in Cuba and the unknown in America. The fear that a society must endure under a dictator’s rule provokes the saddest of images for the people oppressed by the regime. The courageous act of leaving such a place may seem like the only logical choice one can make for themselves; however, if this choice means splitting up your family a well thought out decision must be made. Although, some people were thrust into leaving on the spur of the moment and followed life’s tide literally floating away from their homes into dark and uncharted waters. The strength perspective is reflected in the voices of the respondents, and this is based on the belief that every person, family, and community has capabilities that can be drawn on to overcome problems such as trauma and illness. These daily types of struggles present opportunities for challenge and growth. It is also based on the principle that in every environment, people, groups, and institutions have something to offer. The extraordinary events that touched the lives of the Cubans fleeing Castro’s Revolution went way beyond that of everyday hardships. Through the respondents’ connections with their faith and family their strengths were unmatched, and today their voices tell us all how they overcame such unimaginable obstacles. Their ability to adapt and

be resilient when faced with leaving their country, family, friends, and home, perhaps for forever, speaks to their indomitable spirits.

This study shows that communication plays an important role in the struggle for understanding of their migration experiences among Cuban-Americans and fosters the process of community empowerment. Blogging is a participatory practice and a process whereby Cuban-American immigrants can reduce their alienation, express their loss, and increase their connection, knowledge, and awareness through communication. Through their communication of experiences of shared loss, pain, courage, and their future hopes and dreams, bloggers receive recognition by others with the same experience which invokes empathy, connection, and community empowerment. According to Gutierrez (1994), empowerment is a process of increasing self-efficacy; developing a critical consciousness; skill building that allows the individual to develop resources to be more powerful on an individual, interpersonal, or political level; and involvement with similar others. This empowerment process is a “continual process of growth and change which can occur throughout the lifecycle” (p. 205). Blogging narratives is an empowering process of building community and an act of resilience for people who reach out and communicate virtually to share, connect, and understand their experiences in the Mariel Cuban emigration. Gutierrez (1994) argues that if communities and health care providers are to create structures and programs to mediate the effects of stress and encourage empowerment, they should consider the empowerment process perspective; particularly, she notes, when working with marginalized groups who are likely to experience stress due to societal injustice and inadequate access to resources.

Conclusions and Implications

This study provides exploratory evidence that Cubans who came to America during the Mariel Boatlift are relevant to the field of social work. Their positive attributes of courage, strong connection with their faith and family, and ability

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to adapt under pressure provide a significant role model for others who may find themselves in similar situations. America is facing enormous immigration pressures from our neighbors around the world. Many are being chased by terrorism, poverty, and disease. It is through our ability to remember a time when most Americans came to this country from another homeland to find support and success that we must not forget what that journey is like and how much resiliency it takes to survive.

Future social work research could explore the strengths perspective and the resiliency of the Cuban-Americans who came to America during the Mariel Boatlift, and how it affects later arriving immigrants from other countries. These immigrant groups will have different histories and motivations for leaving behind their homelands and risking it all to start a new life on American soil. The announcement by then President Obama that the United States and Cuba have opened diplomatic relations and eased some of the trade restrictions that have been in place for more than 50 years has started a range of reactions across American political party lines and most importantly among Cuban-Americans of several generations. This news has appeared to have strong and separate responses expressed in the American social media among Cuban-Americans through noted generational difference in two ways. For example, when Cuban-American Carlos Eire, a well-known author and professor of history and religion at Yale University, was asked by National Public Radio correspondent Scott Simon about his reaction to the news, he expressed concerns (National Public Radio, 2014). He stated that not just the older exiles of the children and grandchildren, but also the recent arrivals from Cuba to America, have conflicting responses to the news. He concludes that they have a completely different view of things because many of them, if not most of them, were born after Castro took over and they have no memory of the previous Cuba. However, for those who were from the older generation, this is the unthinkable. Regardless of the generational responses to the political changes that are developing between Cuba and America, and despite the many complex issues that face war

torn and impoverished immigrants fleeing from dictatorships and violence in a host of countries while seeking refuge in America, the settling of Cuban-American immigrants in America seems to be unique in its own way. The history of Cuban-American immigrants across the generations provides an example of one group of people who have overcome great adversity through a demonstration of lasting examples of courage and the ability to connect and adapt to a different way of life while holding on to their core values. The Cuban-American story blogs transcend the hardships overcome by these immigrant peoples, and reminds us all why America remains the destination for freedom seekers from all over the globe.

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