
SOCIAL SCIENCES

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE: TOTAL ASSIMILATION

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Abstract: Human migration can be traced back to tens of thousands of years ago. Before societies were formed, Homo Sapiens ventured out and migrated for similar reasons people immigrate today. They left everything they've known for due to unsuitable living conditions and ventured out to find a better life. In today's world immigration is governed by countries and their immigration laws, and is undeniably at the forefront of current events. The word immigration only defines a legal procedure that does not take into account an immigrant's integration into a new society, and often times the assimilation process is overlooked. The struggles a new immigrant experiences can be extremely difficult, especially with a language barrier, and previous trauma can compound the anxiety they experience trying to survive in a new country. This paper explores various immigration struggles including language learning and mental health, and tries to answer the question: Is total assimilation in a new culture ever possible?

Introduction

Immigration is undeniably a hot topic in today's world, no matter where you are in the world. People immigrate for a variety of reasons, but most immigrate for a better life. Immigration from war-torn countries, immigration from undeveloped countries; some are refugees and some are visa lottery winners. Ultimately it is immigration from the known to the unknown. Although the United States was built on immigration, immigrants today are easily overlooked, ignored, or often thought of as a burden on the system. The blame is automatically placed on the foreigners, but what many fail to see is the difficulty they have in assimilating into the current American culture. Language learning is first and foremost the most important aspect of navigating the American society, however there is more to it than language. Cultural and societal norms, as well as laws play an intricate part of the assimilation process. Is total assimilation ever possible you ask? Not a chance.

Humans are inherently migratory creatures, with the earliest evidence of migration being over around

80, 000 years ago when modern humans moved out of Africa. DNA studies suggest that between 1, 000 to 50, 000 humans made the great move, though their motives are unknown. There are several theories that suggest massive droughts might have driven them out, or new technology or a genetic mutation might have encouraged them to explore new lands [1]. Since this first great migration, there have been numerous waves of migrations, emigrations, and immigrations. One of the more famous immigration wave in modern history is undoubtedly the immigration of millions of Europeans to the United States from 1892 to 1954 through Ellis Island. In 1907 alone, the Ellis Island immigration office processed over 1 million immigrants, a record for the number of immigrants received in one year [2]. Immigrants were coming from all over Europe trying to escape poverty, political unrest, and social instability in their native countries. This wave of immigration undoubtedly changed the cultural and social landscape of the United States and has had a profound impact on the genealogy of Americans today, as it is estimated that 40 percent of current

Americans can trace their ancestry to someone who has entered through Ellis Island [2]. As with immigrants today, there was a great pressure to assimilate into the American culture but also a desire to maintain the native culture. Subsequent generations have assimilated over the decades to the point where many are unaware of their immigrant roots.

The Immigration Experience

Whether a person immigrates to a new foreign land, or a refugee seeking a safer place to live, both have something in common. Both are embarking on a new physical and emotional “adventure”. They are both going to encounter a completely new physical and cultural environment different than the one they’ve known. This places a certain stress on the human psyche. As an immigrant-to-be to the United States, imagine this far too common scenario. Today you are in your own home surrounded by your family, having dinner and enjoying your favorite traditional dish. You bid farewell to the family and friends you’ve known all of your life and are cautiously optimistic about the next chapter in your life. Tomorrow you are on a 12 plus hour flight to the United States where you cannot understand what the TSA agent is trying to ask you. “How long will you be in this country?” You give them a blank stare while blood rushes to every extremity, and you are scared that the agent will deny you entry. Everything around you is now foreign and you have no one to help you. Anxiety mounts and this moment is forever engrained in your memory. As immigrants we’ve all that immediate shock; a wave of panic, fear, blood rushing throughout your body, all wrapped in an anxiety bomb that has to get stored away so you can move forward and get to your destination.

The next step. The American Dream.

The next step is to try to learn the foreign language that surrounds you everywhere, while trying to find a job or an opportunity that can help you provide for you (and most often times your family). You are again overcome with anxiety and are uncertain of the future. The irony does not escape you as you think of the uncertain life you left behind, for a new

uncertain life in a foreign land. You now need to make friends, connections, and try to navigate the new society.

The American Dream is something that every immigrant chases. The big house with manicured lawns, the nice cushy nine-to-five job, the shiny new car. Coincidentally, this is also the dream that many Americans chase. In the aftermath of the economic disaster many American families are left picking up the pieces and trying to make it in an uncertain future. Pair that with an unknown language and culture, and you’re now faced with even greater hurdles. As an immigrant you now have to start from point zero. Culture shock is something that is overlooked even by immigrants themselves, however it is a feeling that all immigrants have when they arrive in a foreign land. It is overlooked because no one is there to hold your hand and explain what the Imperial measuring system is or why it is 100 degrees outside. You panic seeing the large temperatures as you slowly learn temperature is measured in Fahrenheit and not Celsius. As an immigrant you have to learn as you go and you always have to think ahead. You have to assimilate and integrate fast; there is no time to waste thinking about your mental health. Many of the experiences immigrants encounter in a new country can be traumatizing. Let’s say you are from a culture where corporal punishment of children is absolutely the cultural norm, and you now find yourself in the U.S. where that type of punishment is considered child abuse. If you discipline your child via corporal punishment in a public place, and a “good Samaritan” reports you to the Child Supportive Services, you are now in big trouble. You don’t think you did anything wrong because that is what your cultural norm is, however in the eyes of the government you now live under, you are a criminal and you may be arrested for child abuse. This is an extreme yet common example, and immigrants (no matter how new to the country) are held to the same standard as citizens that have lived in the U.S. for all of their lives. An experience such as this can be extremely traumatizing and destructive to an immigrant and their family, especially when your status in the country can be jeopardized by such issues.

Mental Health

An important part of immigration that is overlooked, and even unknown to most natives, is that immigration is not only in the context of language learning or even assimilation. Mental health is a key piece that is extremely important, yet overlooked. In the United States, mental health is often associated with disorders such as schizophrenia, Alzheimer's, OCD, etc. While those can be true amongst immigrants as well, the mental stress that immigration places on one person's mental health is immense. Many people who have not traveled outside their state or even country cannot even begin to imagine the anxiety and seclusion felt by foreigners. An unknown language, unknown customs, and unknown societal norms, are all grounds for mounting anxiety in an individual.

Refugees who flee their own war-torn countries, as well as political and religious asylum seekers, can be placed in a special category of mental trauma sufferers. These are individuals who have no choice but to leave the environment and people they have known all their lives for a foreign place that is safer to live. Being fortunate enough to live in the U.S. in a middle class neighborhood as I'm writing this paper, it is hard for me to imagine leaving everything you knew behind today and moving to a foreign country tomorrow because you have to survive. Refugees suffer trauma even before they get to their new destination. They live in constant fear that their houses might get raided, a mass shooting might happen while they try to buy groceries, or a suicide bomber might target their bus on their way to the refugee camp. Others live in constant terror of their government, cartels, guerrilla groups, and the violence they bring.

With all of that emotional baggage, refugees are flown to new foreign lands where they are expected to assimilate quickly and seamlessly into their new environment. This is a completely unrealistic expectation. There are quite a few studies on dif-

ferent ethnic groups, their trauma, and their post-immigration experience to the U.S. that surrounds mental health. Fortuna, L. Lisa et. al. studied Latin American immigrants that have encountered violence in their countries. This study concludes that these immigrants are in need of systematic mental health screenings and related services [4]. It also concluded that certain subgroups of Latinos, including Latino men "were less likely to access mental health services" after experiencing traumas such as political violence [4].

Another study focused on Bhutanese refugees and their post-immigration suicide rate and ideation from 2009 to 2012. This study found that while "prearrival and post arrival suicide rates among Bhutanese refugees appear similar, different psychological stressors occur at each stage of the resettlement process" [5]. It also stresses the need for suicide awareness training for service providers, as well as additional services that could help refugees better integrate into the American society.

What is noteworthy, is the stressors noted by the studied refugees who indicated suicidal ideation. Anxiety was reported by 84.6%, as well as "being unable to find work" [5]. Other stressors were "lack of choice over future", depression, and "nonprovider for family" [5]. Children for example have a higher chance of learning the language and culture of their new country, as they are placed in school and are exposed daily to that language and culture.

Myself as an example, I moved to Japan at the age of 10 from Romania without any prior knowledge of the culture or language. My third day in a foreign land, I found myself in a Japanese school surrounded by people I didn't know how spoke a language I didn't understand. It took me approximately 6 months being in a Japanese school and twice-a-week tutoring to reach a fluency level acceptable for my grade. With this in mind, imagine an immigrant adult who does not have the daily exposure to the language and culture as a child would. It is easy for an adult to become reclusive, overwhelmed, filled

with anxiety, and not develop their language skills because their fears overcome their being.

Historical trauma is also something that can and will follow immigrants. Depending on the country of origin, immigrants will have different generational trauma that can affect their mental health. Civil wars and political unrest, economical struggles, oppression, and a variety of factors that have plagued their families, will follow an individual for life. This can translate into a variety of issues and hurdles in their lives in a new country. Distrust for the government, fear of speaking out, and fear in general can overcome an individual.

Assimilation

Jacob L. Vigor set out to measure immigrant assimilation levels across ethnic origins and socio-economic levels. The data varies across the board and not only the characteristics and origins of an individual come into play, but also their previous knowledge and their current location have a significant impact on the assimilation process. His significant findings are that assimilation has “declined during the 1980s, remained stable through the 1990s, and has actually increased slightly over the past few years” though it “remains lower than it was at any point during the early 20th century wave of immigration.” [3]. The report also finds that “immigrants from developed countries are not necessarily more assimilated” and that “the foreign-born children of immigrants continue to bear a strong resemblance to their native-born counterparts.” [3].

The human factor is an integral part of assimilation, because learning skills and the will to learn will vary from person to person. Children have greater learning capabilities and when placed in schools, have a better chance at learning the native language and integrating into society. Adults on the other hand are left to their skills at navigating a new environment. Often times they will find a group of immigrants from their native country and get stuck

in a bubble that is used as a crutch. This crutch is perceived as a Golden goose, however it is in reality extremely counterproductive. Being in a so-called bubble of a community who speaks your language rarely motivates individuals to learn the language and culture of their new country. Indeed, many immigrants succeed in their own communities without fully assimilating into the American culture or learning English.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is not to criticize the U.S. immigration system or current international affairs, but rather to give an insight to the multifaceted burden immigration places on an individual and their psyche. It’s also intended to shed a light on the individual immigrant who will most likely not disclose their immigration experience and past traumas.

So is total assimilation by an immigrant ever possible? In my opinion is it an equivocal and resounding no. If you make the move from your home country to another foreign country, no matter at what age, you are carrying your cultural values and customs with you. Now what about babies and small children? you may ask. Infants and small children who are not yet of school age will be brought up by their families, who in turn carry their home countries customs, values, and language. Total assimilation is virtually impossible, no matter how much English you speak and how good your “American accent” is. Total assimilation is very possible by the first generation in the new country, the generation that is born and raised in that land, while by the second generation it may very well be inevitable. While the home country’s language and customs might persist in a family environment, with time, little by little the native land’s flavor gets diminished and ultimately fades. Though at a price of the loss of ethnic language and culture, that would be considered the total and ultimate assimilation.

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