

EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF LATINO VOLUNTARY MIGRANTS AS THEY ACCULTURATE TO THE UNITED STATES

by

MITZY VELAZCO

(Under the Direction of Aliko Nicolaidis)

ABSTRACT

This study explores the connection between transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1978) and acculturation theory (Berry, 1992), focusing on the migration experiences of Latino voluntary migrants. Transformative learning theory, originally proposed by Mezirow, serves as a lens to understand how migration acts as a critical life event, triggering profound reflections and revisions of previously held beliefs. The research emphasizes the complex processes of cultural adaptation and learning that voluntary migrants engage with new environments, underscoring migration not just as a physical relocation but as a journey of personal and cultural transformation. The study explores how Latino voluntary migrants attempt to obtain a sense of belonging in unfamiliar cultural settings and how this journey influences their adaptation strategies, identity renegotiation, and transformative learning experiences. By highlighting the lived experiences of Latino voluntary migrants, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of cultural transition, including the challenges of establishing a sense of belonging and the transformative potential of migration in shaping new identities and perspectives in new cultural environments.

INDEX WORDS: transformative learning, acculturation, cultural adaptation, culture shock, migrants, migration experience, identity, belonging, culture, disorienting dilemmas, emotions

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my grandmother, Ana Zita Lopez de Rowe, whom I lovingly call *Mamá*. Your courageous decision to leave your hometown in search of a better future transformed our lives and established you as the matriarch of our family. The migration you initiated has brought me to this moment. Though you have recently departed from this physical world, your spirit continues to inspire and uplift me. Your incredible strength and unwavering support illuminated my path throughout my studies, guiding me like a beacon of hope. I can feel your loving presence surrounding me, celebrating this important milestone in spirit. Each day, I strive to embody the immense resilience and courage you exemplified during your extraordinary life. I miss you deeply and will always hold you in my heart, grateful for your love and guidance until your last breath.

I dedicate this dissertation to myself, honoring my perseverance and sacrifices made on this challenging yet profoundly transformative journey. It pays tribute to the late nights of deep reflection, the countless hours of research and writing, and the determination that fueled my quest for knowledge. Embracing the vulnerability of genuine scholarly inquiry, I stepped into the unknown with open arms, allowing my personal experiences and innate curiosity to guide me throughout the years. This is for me—for every step taken in darkness and for every moment of light found along the way. Each challenge embraced with resilience has shaped my academic journey and molded me into the scholar and individual I am today. This dedication acknowledges the hard work and personal sacrifices made to reach this moment. It reflects my journey of letting knowledge merge organically, guided by my questions, doubts, and discoveries. From quiet breakthroughs to triumphant successes over seemingly insurmountable obstacles, this

dissertation stands as a testament to a journey uniquely mine. May my work inspire readers to pursue their passions with courage, to question the world around them, and to recognize that within every challenge lies an opportunity to learn, grow, and transform. This achievement isn't solely mine; it embodies the unwavering support and encouragement that fueled me throughout these years. May the effort and perseverance reflected in this accomplishment inspire others to chase their dreams as I have.

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and challenges, is a precious bond I hold close to my heart. Every moment we spend together enriches my life, and I treasure our connection more than words can convey.

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PREFACE

It Starts With Me

The simplicity and complexity of my story encapsulate a transformational journey that has taught me the power of letting go of control, embracing change in the face of ambiguity, and rebuilding amidst challenges. Van Manen (2016) discussed the concept of “the thing that happened to me” (p. 51), and I have chosen to share my “thing”: my migration experience from Panamá to the United States and the acculturation process I continue to endure after 25 years as a voluntary Latina migrant living in this country.

Migration Is Expecting New Experiences

In Panamá, my older brother and I were raised by my grandmother, with the help of my aunts and uncles. My mother moved to the United States for better opportunities when I was 4 years old. I recall seeing her sporadically and talking on the phone for brief periods. For 14 years, she tried to get us into the United States, but the embassy denied us visas. At some point, my older brother was able to travel and left. One day, when I was 18, the embassy finally granted me a visa, allowing me to enter the country only once over a 10-year period. My family was unaware of this important detail, as we later learned. After being rejected many times, I did not want to leave my home for a country that did not fully welcome me. Nevertheless, I felt obligated to make the trip because my 3-year-old little brother, who lived in the United States, had passed away unexpectedly.

Nothing about that trip was memorable, other than the reason behind it and a conversation with my mother. She asked me to return to the United States to learn English, which

seemed like a great opportunity, so I agreed. On my second trip, I was doing what is called *migration*, as I learned many years later. My grandmother had arranged everything for me to travel and informed me that I would be traveling alone, but someone from the airline would accompany me until my older brother picked me up. I did not give it much thought because I was thrilled to embark on this adventure. Although I felt mixed emotions about traveling alone, my attention quickly turned to the opportunities that awaited me. I was eager to live with my mother for the first time in years, learn a new language, and see snow.

On this trip, I realized that migration is expecting new experiences: departing and hoping for new and better things to come. Migration is expecting new experiences while promising not to forget one's family, and anticipating the opportunity to make new friends. Migration is leaving home behind and wanting to establish a new one far away.

Migration Is a Farewell

I felt the need to tell everyone I was leaving, so they would not forget me. In the weeks leading up to my trip, I visited my aunts and uncles to say goodbye and shared the news with neighbors. Some seemed disappointed. Others encouraged me to travel to *El Norte* and learn a new language.

I sat in my room and looked around to take a mental picture: the rose-colored walls, four large windows, and sunlight coming in. I got up, walked to the closet, and grabbed a dress my "mom," as I called my grandmother, made for my *quinceaños*. I put it in a clear bag, folded it, and safely stored it for when I returned.

I walked outside the house and looked at every plant. My grandmother and I shared many moments while caring for the plants throughout the years. I stood in front of a sunflower she

taught me how to plant and care for. I said to it, "Keep growing and wait for me to see you." I hugged my dogs, played with my birds, and listened to the sounds of nature.

I helped my grandmother in every way I could until the day I departed. I said goodbye while hugging her. I promised her I would not forget her. I was devastated to leave her behind. She comforted me as I walked through the house, looking at every room until I reached the door.

Migration is a farewell, as I said goodbye because I did not want others to forget me. It is a farewell because I tried to memorize every detail of my house so as not to forget it. Migration is a farewell, as I was trying to keep my belongings safe until my return. It was a farewell, as I contemplated nature, not knowing if or when I would be back to experience it again. Migration is a farewell, as I cried, missing home, while driving away from home.

Migration Is a Chain of Movements

When I got into my aunt's vehicle, it was quiet. I could only hear the engine running and waited for her to start driving. When the car moved, I looked out the window, so I would not forget the house, the two mango trees, and the avocado trees in the backyard. My aunt drove for 2 hours, while I cried. At the airport, I stepped out of the car and heard birds chirping. It was green all around us. We got my luggage out and waited a long time to check in. At the Continental Airlines counter, my aunt reminded the representative that I was flying alone and asked to ensure I had help upon arrival. The person said I would be arriving at Newark Airport in New Jersey and reassured her that someone would be with me until I was picked up. My aunt looked at me and said, "Don't worry. You will be fine."

I got in line for the security checkpoint. My aunt talked to me while I waited, but I do not remember the details. I can only remember feeling nervous, looking around, and seeing many

people. At some point, I had to continue alone. My aunt hugged me, told me she loved me, and waved goodbye. I felt tears coming down my face and waved back.

Migration is a chain of movements, never a chance to stand still; the only constant is change. Migration is a chain of movements, where one constantly walks toward or away from something or someone. It is a chain of movements, being told to go, to come, to sit, to enter, or to leave. Migration is a chain of movements, as others wait for one's arrival. It is moving from one place to another, without knowing when it will stop.

Migration Is Feeling Lost in the Unknown

After the security checkpoint, I looked around and felt lost—but at least I could understand everyone. At some point, a flight attendant at the gate called my name to board. It was comforting to know that someone was there to help me through the process of boarding, finding my seat, and buckling my seatbelt. I looked out the window and saw workers placing the luggage in cargo hold.

As the plane took off, I remember breathing slowly and looking at many different types of trees outside the window. I thought, *I will be back soon. Do not miss me too much.* Eventually, my conversation with trees was interrupted by the clouds. I then felt excited, but after a couple of hours, I began to think about what I had left behind. A feeling of sadness overtook me, and tears rolled down my face. They did not stop for 3 hours. It was the second time I was traveling, but it felt like the first time because I was unsure of what to expect once I arrived.

When the plane landed, people clapped. I was puzzled. People opened the overhead compartments and removed their luggage. Everyone deplaned, while I waited for someone to tell me what to do, but the flight attendant never returned. I got up and followed the people as they left the airplane. A Spanish-speaking lady asked me if I knew where I was going. I said no. She

asked me to follow her, so I did. We ended up in an area with many people. It was very loud. I could hear someone on a speaker but could not understand. I made it to a counter with a man in uniform. He spoke to me in English. Not knowing what he said, I smiled. I felt scared. He stepped away to talk to another man in uniform. He returned, took my passport, put it in a red folder, and pointed to his right.

I went down a long hallway, with a man at the end standing in front of a door. I looked around, walking with the red folder and my backpack. The man said something I could not understand. He opened the door and pointed at a chair. I sat down. I looked around. I saw people crying, upset, and scared. I thought, *This must be what jail looks like*. After 2 hours, a man in uniform called my name and waved for me to go over. There was a glass window at the counter, which was higher than me. The man spoke some Spanish, and I felt relieved because I could understand him. He said I had permission to enter the country only once, and this was my second trip.

He asked me, "Who are you here to see?"

I answered, "My mother."

He asked, "Do you have a phone number to call her?"

I said yes and quickly looked at my brown, six-ring binder, flipped to the contacts tab, searched for her number, and handed it to him. He picked up his phone, dialed, and spoke in English. After some time, he handed me the phone. It was my mother. I felt relieved and smiled. The man gave me my passport, pointed to the door, and said, "Welcome to the United States." I answered, "*Gracias*," with a smile.

My mother told me afterward that they asked about her immigration status, and she informed them that she was a citizen and that I would be staying with her because she was

claiming residency. She explained that a travel agency was doing the paperwork. They had not mentioned anything about needing additional permission to enter the country, so we were unaware of the entry restriction. Because my mother was a citizen, they could not send me back.

I left the room and walked down the same hallway, which had high ceilings, white walls, and light gray carpet. The loud, crowded area had become quiet and empty. Most of the people had left, and the remaining ones were whispering. I remember seeing a man pacing, but I could not see his face. I kept walking, and the man ran toward me. I was nervous—until I realized it was my older brother. Then, I felt joy and ran toward him. He gave me a tight hug and asked me many questions: Where was I all that time? Did someone from the airline help me? Whom did I talk with? What happened? He kept on going until, eventually, he said, “I was so worried, but I was not going to leave this place until I found you,” and he hugged me again. I told him what had happened, and then he called my mother. I remember him saying, “I got her.”

Outside, it was warm and very sunny. We got in the car, and I asked him how far we were from the house: 4 hours. He played music from Panamá, while I looked out the window. I wanted to absorb everything I could. I remember smelling the air to see if it differed from Panamá. Everything seemed bigger and contrasting. There were billboards with graffiti on the buildings. I asked my brother what the billboards said. I tried to understand them, but I could not. After driving for some time, I told him I was hungry. He stopped at McDonald’s and said, “I’m going to show you something really cool.” He ordered and then handed me an enormous hamburger with fries and a very big plastic cup. I looked at the meal and was amazed. I have never seen anything that size. I held a French fry and said, “*Esto es gigante.*” We laughed together. At that moment, I realized I would learn things I had never imagined.

I understood migration is feeling lost in the unknown, as I experience new things alone. It is fear of the unknown, as I waited for help. Migration is fear of the unknown, when others talked, but I could not understand. Migration is fear of the unknown, when fearing those around but needing to trust them, even when meeting them for the first time.

Migration Is a Transformative Experience of Lifelong Cultural Learning

Choosing to migrate to a new country is often a difficult decision. Voluntary migrants experience a complex process, in which ambiguity is always present. Unknowingly, I entered a cycle of transitions, during which I experienced a constant flow of new information. The only constant was change. A series of shifts became part of my everyday life, causing chaos and confusion; however, 25 years later, I realized this new cultural environment is fertilized soil, where new experiences become the genesis of a lifelong learning journey.

Migration is finally understanding that integration is finding a space where I belong. It is accepting that the world can be viewed in many ways by the people around me. Migration is using my experience to instigate the questioning of cultural assumptions by those I encounter. It is leveraging cultural differences to connect and learn from one another. Migration is learning that I should embrace vulnerability by having the courage to share my journey for the first time. Migration is my transformation.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Problem

The phenomenon of migration, whether forced or voluntary, has become a recognized issue impacting every country around the globe. The United Nations (UN) International Organization for Migration reported, “3.6% of the world’s population are migrants, [encompassing] those who move away from their place of usual residence, within the country or internationally, temporarily or permanently” (McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021, para. 5). Recent UN (2021) statistics show that over “84 million people had been forced from their homes as of November [2021]” (para 1), representing an increase from previous years. This consistent upward trend in migration is troublesome, particularly for the United States, because this country holds more migrants “than any other country in the world [with] more than 40 million people living in the [country], accounting for about one-fifth of the world’s migrant” (Budiman, 2020, para 1) population.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (2023) reported that in 2022, the United States experienced the largest legal migration through “lawful permanent resident (LPR) admission, with 39%” (para. 19), and by mid-2023, LPR numbers had increased to 40%, with reasons for migrating including “immediate relatives of U.S. citizens (51%), followed by employment-based preferences (21%), family-sponsored preferences (17%), and asylee admissions (4%)” (para. 6). These statistics underscore the magnitude of migration trends and the different ways through which individuals enter the United States; however, this alone does not capture the complex nature of migration, as behind these numbers lie many complex human

experiences, each influenced by countless factors, from personal aspirations to global economic dynamics.

Statement of the Problem

Due to the significant influx of people migrating to the United States, it is crucial to understand the origins and motivations behind individuals' decisions to leave their home countries. As highlighted by the Council on Foreign Relations in 2022, the challenge faced by the United States is linked to the need for migrants to find a safe environment and pursue better opportunities. Notably, countries such as “Haiti, the Northern Triangle countries (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras), and countries with Temporary Protection Status (TPS; Afghanistan, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Ukraine, El Salvador, Honduras, and Venezuela)” (Roy, 2022, para 5) have been significant contributors to migrant influxes to the United States.

Although reports from media outlets, such as Forbes, indicate substantial support for migration, with “70% of Americans favoring” it (Semotiuk, 2022, para. 3), the current political climate and national sentiment present a contrasting picture. Contentions between the two leading political parties, Republicans and Democrats, reveal deep divisions in ideologies concerning support and strategies to manage the influx of migrants into the country. According to a 2022 study by the Pew Research Center, “Republicans prioritize border security, [while] Democrats view the path to legal status as very important” (para 7). In both cases, the conflict remains unsolved, exacerbating tensions across the country, while the number of migrants continues to increase.

An aspect of migration often overlooked is the type of migrants and the support available to them. Generally, the conversation is oriented toward involuntary migrants, such as undocumented individuals and refugees, rather than voluntary migrants. Voluntary migrants

move from their countries seeking to improve the “economic and social conditions available in their home country ... [and are not] displaced by war or famine” (Cassidy, 2004, p. 1). Ottonelli and Torresi (2013) bridged the gap to define the conditions to understand the nuances of voluntary migration as a dynamic process characterized by having four conditions: (a) noncoercion, (b) sufficiency, (c) exit option, and (d) information. This comprehensive definition, which can be seen as an intentional movement or “a simplistic binary conceptualization [suggesting] a single direction change” (Skuzza, 2007, p. 449), must be explored to understand who migration affects and their needs “if we want to build inclusive communities and facilitate integration” (Cupsa, 2018, p. 185).

As migrants transition to the United States, their journeys become complex attempts to understand new cultural environments and acquire new learning. They navigate cultural differences from the moment they arrive and must learn to act and apply these new cultural variations, as they seek for ways to participate and belong. These transitions, often accompanied by a culture shock, manifest as “emotional reactions to the loss of perceptual reinforcements from [their] culture to new cultural stimuli with little or no meaning, and to the misunderstanding of new and diverse experiences” (Adler, 1975, p. 13). Such experiences result in disorienting events because migrants “are not equipped, especially in the earliest stage of the transition, to manage and cope effectively with these novel situations and unfamiliar patterns of interaction” (Cupsa, 2018, p. 185). The United States must recognize that the burden of integration cannot be assumed to be “the sole or primary responsibility of migrants” (Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2022, p. 22). Instead, proactive intervention is necessary to alleviate the challenges encountered during this journey, as migration trends suggest that these difficulties will persist and likely continue to grow.

Purpose of the Study

Although there is no clear direction on the best way to manage migration, the continuous arrival of migrants plays a crucial role in highlighting their potential as “creative contributors to the meaning of the world” (Dahlberg et al., 2018, p. 95). Exploring migrants’ movements from the old into the new can offer invaluable insights into the broad phenomenon of migration, shedding light on the complex interaction between individual experiences and the larger social environment. To enhance knowledge of “the everyday world in a way that expands our understanding of the human experience” (Dahlberg et al., 2018, p. 49), the complexity of this phenomenon must be explored. Gaining a comprehensive understanding of migration requires studying the details associated with integration approaches used by voluntary migrants in their journeys. Supporting them is increasingly critical and demands active engagement and a thorough approach from the United States to meet the changing needs of its volunteer migrant population.

I explored the phenomenon of migration in the context of acculturation because individuals experience cultural transitions, adaptation, and learning differently. As Vagle (2018) explained, the “contextual aspects that surround those living the phenomenon will need to be illuminated and explored” (p. 68) to have insights into the phenomenon. Therefore, migration and acculturation must be studied together because these intersect the lived experiences of voluntary migrants moving into new cultural environments.

To examine this phenomenon, I studied the Latino voluntary migrant population because I can relate culturally and communicate with them in Spanish. This approach can contribute to the “openness and immediacy” (Björk & Dalberg, 2013, p. 249) of the research, allowing new insights to emerge about the lived experience of Latino voluntary migrants acculturated in the

United States. Additionally, I selected this group due to my own observations and first-hand experience of the limited support available to them. Finally, I wanted to explore if the phenomenon of migration, in the context of acculturation, enables this group to have transformative learning experiences, as defined by Mezirow (1978), to identify the implications for the Latino voluntary community and society at large.

Theoretical Framework Underpinning the Study

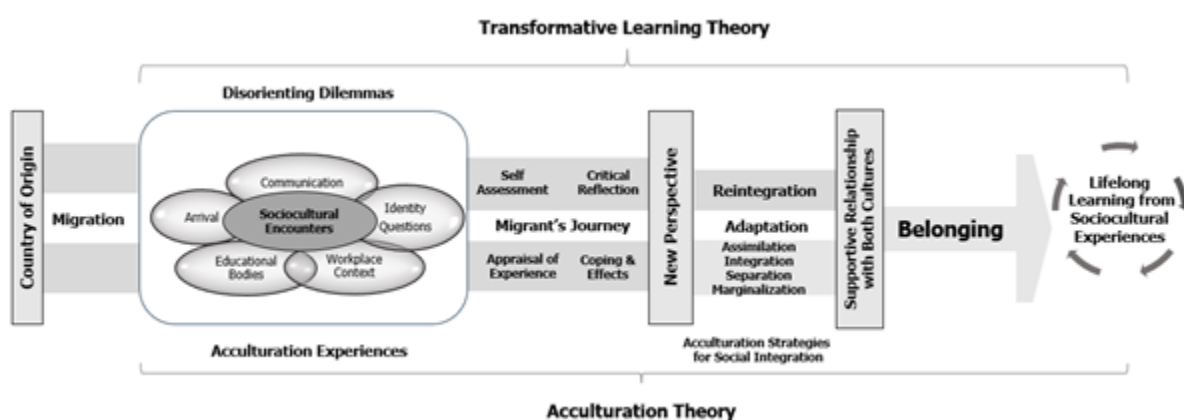
Transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1978) and acculturation theory (Berry, 1992) can be utilized to emphasize that the early years of life are a critical period for individuals. During this time, “meaning perspectives are acquired in childhood through the process of socialization, often in the context of an emotionally charged relationship with parents, teachers, or other mentors” (Mezirow, 1990, p. 3). Individuals learn their culture, language, social cues, and beliefs and create assumptions about their environment. These preconceived assumptions then influence their abilities to accept, reject, or make meaning because “migration constitutes different life-shaking incidents or triggering events in the host country, prompting one to reinterpret previous life views and personal beliefs” (Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2022, p. 91).

According to Chirkov (2009), researchers should study migrants’ experiences “during their transitions from one culture to another, followed by an understanding of the meanings they assign to their actions in various situations” (p. 102). As migrants enter liminal spaces, they must learn to navigate various sociocultural encounters, which can trigger confusion, prompting them to self-reflect on or appraise a particular new experience. Mezirow’s (1978) transformative learning theory and Berry’s (1992) acculturation theory provide a unique framework for analyzing this phenomenon, as they can be used to consider the participants’ points of view, identifying perspective learning and adaptation strategies as new cultural conditions appear (see

Figures 1 and 2). In addition to both theories, the theoretical framework is complemented by incorporating concepts from “Erikson’s re-envisioned eight stages of psychosocial development” (Sacco, 2013, p. 143) and culture shock literature (Adler, 1975; Cupsa, 2018; Furham, 2012; Ward et al., 2008).

Figure 1

Bridging Cultures: Latino Voluntary Migrants Transformative Learning Journeys



Acculturation literature refers to migration experiences as ones that “place a load or demand stemming from the experience of having to deal with two cultures in contact and having to participate to some extent in both of them” (Berry, 1997, p. 18). Some trigger events explored in culture shock and acculturation literature relate to the migrant’s arrival in the host country, new cultural context, communication challenges, and new work and educational transitions and environments (Adler, 1975; Berry, 1997; Cupsa, 2018; Furham, 2012; Ward et al., 2008).

Transformative learning theory calls these trigger events “disorienting dilemmas [which] may be evoked by an eye-opening discussion, book, poem, or painting or by one’s efforts to understand a different culture that challenges one’s presuppositions” (Mezirow, 1990, p. 9). These disorienting dilemmas become “catalysts or trigger events that precipitate critical reflection and

transformations” (Mezirow, 1990, p. 9), which “become a [new] learning experience” (Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2022, p. 90). Once new learning is produced, an individual may adopt or reintegrate with a newfound meaning perspective.

Berry (1997) explained that, according to acculturation theory, adaptation refers to the "relatively stable changes that occur in an individual or group as a response to environmental demands" (p. 20). Migrants adapt by choosing which social strategy to employ based on their need to adjust to their host country.

Assumptions

This research assumes that migration to the United States poses considerable challenges for Latino voluntary migrants. It is hypothesized that successfully transitioning into the host country is contingent upon the migrants' ability to comprehend and adapt to their new sociocultural environment. By understanding the cultural context in which they arrive, the integration of Latino voluntary migrants can be facilitated, resulting in a smoother acculturation process that enables them to navigate the complexities of their new society, access resources, and establish meaningful connections with individuals from diverse backgrounds.

This study also operates on the assumption that individuals who migrate to the United States have some familiarity with the culture they will encounter. This knowledge enables them to familiarize themselves with the general customs, norms, and expectations prevalent in the host country upon arrival, without requiring in-depth knowledge of the culture shock they may experience. This assumption may lead to this group fostering cultural awareness, bridging potential gaps, mitigating misunderstandings, and engaging proactively in social interactions, ultimately leading to a greater sense of belonging, improved sociocultural adaptation, and enhanced opportunities for socioeconomic mobility.

Significance of the Study and Research Questions

This study holds significant importance because it explores how a change in perspective can serve as a catalyst for new learning for Latino voluntary migrants. It examines the navigation of cultural differences between individualistic cultures, such as the United States (Fatehi et al., 2020, p. 11), and collectivist societies, including those found in Latin America. Understanding this concept is crucial for empowering Latino voluntary migrants to develop agency and self-advocacy skills, helping them find ways to belong in the United States while embracing their new cultural identity. Additionally, the study emphasizes the importance of various entities such as workplaces, educational institutions, and the United States as the host country in recognizing and addressing the unique needs of voluntary migrants. This approach can facilitate smoother integration and contribute to a more united and inclusive society.

Another benefit of this study is its contributions to the field of adult education, specifically in the transformative learning literature. The study expands on the complex dynamics of perspective change and migration, exploring the intersections between sociocultural encounters, perspective change, and emotions. It acknowledges that these changes are not only logistical or cultural, but also emotionally charged, often involving feelings of loss, confusion, and identity crisis that may lead to a change in perspective, highlighting the mutual benefits of creating supportive environments that enable individuals to thrive amidst the challenges of their newfound perspective. Such an approach emphasizes the importance of nurturing and building communities that facilitate growth and encourage resilience in the face of migration challenges and perspective transformations.

Lastly, this study aims to bridge the gap between migrations and the universal need to belong among Latino voluntary migrants, as they arrive in the United States. Understanding the

challenges faced on their journeys can create opportunities to promote a sense of belonging and facilitate their integration into their new cultural environment. Enabling a mutual understanding between voluntary migrants and their new communities in the United States can foster a more inclusive society that values and supports the diverse backgrounds and experiences of all its members.

I explored the phenomenon of voluntary migration in the context of acculturation through the following research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of migration of Latino voluntary migrants seeking to acculturate to the United States?
2. How does migration lead to transformative learning in the context of acculturation?

The topics explored in this study can shape perspective change for voluntary migrants, emphasizing how transitions are integral to their learning, integration, and adaptation processes. This research highlights that understanding and navigating transitions can catalyze significant personal growth and transformation.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the foundation for a study on the exploration of the Latino voluntary migrant experience, as they acculturate to the United States. It integrated the frameworks of transformative learning and acculturation theory to analyze the complexities of cultural adaptation and learning. The study aims to capture the essence of Latino voluntary migrants' experiences and their strategies for navigating transitions as they confront and adapt to the cultural nuances of their new environment. As such, examining the intersection of migration and acculturation enables an understanding of the contextual factors that influence these

experiences, highlighting the importance of supportive mechanisms in facilitating their integration process.

The study is positioned in the field of adult education and uncovers how the process of migration and acculturation intersects with adult learning, specific to how migrants acquire new knowledge and skills, as they seek to belong. The significance of this study lies in its theoretical contributions, which extend beyond informing practical approaches. It examines the role of various societal entities, including educational institutions and workplaces, in supporting migrants' adaptation journeys. The research emphasizes the need for cultural sensitivity and mutual understanding to foster an inclusive society that appreciates the richness of diversity brought by migrants and facilitates their successful integration and participation in the United States.

In the following chapters, I present a detailed roadmap designed to understand the lived experiences of Latino voluntary migrants and their acculturation to the United States. Chapter 2 provides a theoretical review of transformative learning and acculturation theory, while integrating the culture shock literature that supports the study. This combination helps to investigate the learnings, transition, and adaptation processes of the Latino voluntary migrant experience. In Chapter 3, I introduce phenomenology as the methodology and identify reflective lifeworld research as the approach. Additionally, I have included the scholarly foundations to investigate the phenomenon of interest, while outlining the participant selection and recruitment strategies, as well as the data collection and analysis processes, to capture and interpret the complex interaction of culture, learning, and adaptation in the lived experiences of Latino voluntary migrants in the United States. Chapter 4 of this dissertation introduces the findings derived from the qualitative analysis, incorporating carefully selected vignettes that exemplify

and reinforce the primary results. This chapter systematically delineates the emergent themes and key components that characterize the phenomenon under investigation. Each vignette illuminates the practical and theoretical implications of these themes, offering a more nuanced understanding of the intricate elements of the phenomenon. This structured presentation ensures a scholarly exposition of the study's outcomes, providing readers with a clear and insightful exploration of the fundamental aspects that defined the research. Finally, chapter 5 displays the conclusions and discussions derived from the research, emphasizing the connections between the theoretical framework and the empirical findings. This chapter examined the research implications for future studies, theoretical advancements, and professional practice, underscoring how the findings contribute to each field. To conclude, the chapter features an epilogue reflecting my experiences as a migrant and a scholar. This reflection digs into how the research has deepened my engagement with my narrative, revealing opportunities for agency and personal growth that the study has uncovered. This personal account enriches the academic discussion by introducing a unique and introspective dimension to the overall research journey.

Definition of Terms

For this study, the following definitions were used.

Acculturation: Acculturation includes all changes that arise following contact between groups and individuals of different cultural backgrounds (Sam & Berry, 2016).

Acculturation strategy: Acculturation strategies are based on the distinction between orientations toward one's own group and those toward other groups (Berry, 1980). This distinction is rendered as (a) a relative preference for "maintenance of one's heritage culture and identity" (Sam & Berry, 2010, p. 476), versus not maintaining them and (b) a relative preference for "seeking relationships with other groups" (Sam & Berry, 2010, p. 477) and participating in

the larger society, versus avoiding such relationships. There are four strategies that depend on which ethnocultural group (dominant or nondominant) is being considered.

Assimilation strategy: In an assimilation strategy, individuals do not wish to maintain their cultural identity and seek daily interaction with other cultures (Berry, 2008).

Collectivist culture: In a collectivist culture, groups are of primary importance, and individuals are secondary. In these cultures, individuals acknowledge the contributions of others to their existence. They may sacrifice self-interest to promote the interest of the collective. (Fatehi et al., 2020).

Culture shock: Culture shock is a process that someone goes through, as they are experiencing a new, unfamiliar situation or environment that requires developing new modes of symbolic representation and new perspectives on self, others, and the environment. (Cupsa, 2018). Culture shock is primarily a set of emotional reactions to the loss of perceptual reinforcements from one's own culture, to new cultural stimuli that has little or no meaning, and to the misunderstanding of new and diverse experiences. It may encompass feelings of helplessness and irritability and fears of being cheated, contaminated, injured, or disregarded (Adler, 1975).

Disorienting dilemmas: Disorienting dilemmas are crises that begin the process of transformation from an effort to understand that which contradicts one's previously accepted presuppositions (Mezirow, 1991).

Exit options: When thinking about voluntary migration, exit options include the ability to leave the host country including not only the choices available when deciding to enter the country but also the ongoing availability of the alternatives to stay to remain viable. Even when

these alternatives exist, they can still come with significant costs for the migrant (Ottonelli & Torresi, 2013, p. 802).

Frame of reference: Meaning perspective, the structure of assumptions and expectations through which sense impressions are filtered. It involves cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions. It involves the context for making meaning in which we choose what and how a sensory experience is to be construed or appropriated (Mezirow, 2000).

Individualist cultures: In individualistic cultures, people behave according to self-interest and personal preferences and consider independence and self-sufficiency very important (Fatehi et al., 2020).

Information: The condition of information for voluntary migration includes adequate knowledge of what the migrant is choosing (Ottonelli & Torresi, 2013).

Integration strategy: When an integration strategy is used, there is an interest by individuals in both maintaining one's original culture, while having daily interactions with other groups. There is some degree of cultural integrity maintained, while at the same time seeking, as a member of an ethnocultural group, to participate as an integral part of the evolving larger social network (Berry, 2008).

Involuntary migrants: Involuntary migrants include any foreign-born people who have migrated to the United States because they have been displaced from their home country, fear persecution, or have been moved by deception or coercion (Cassidy, 2004).

Learning: Learning is the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience as a guide to future action (Mezirow, 2000).

Liminal space: A liminal space is a state between two sets of meaning frameworks: letting go of the prevailing but not yet reaching the potential one. The subject faces the threat of disintegration, as they give up the relative stability of one configuration (of self) in preparation for a new way of being (Mälkki & Green, 2014).

Marginalization strategy: With marginalization strategy, there is little possibility or interest in cultural maintenance (often for reasons of enforced cultural loss) and little interest in having relations with others (often for reasons of exclusion or discrimination; Berry, 2008).

Noncoercion: Noncoercion is a requirement for migration to be voluntary: it must not be caused by physical or psychological coercion (Ottonelli & Torresi, 2013).

Transformation in meaning perspective: Transformation in meaning perspective can happen only through taking the perspective of others who have a more critical awareness of the psychocultural assumptions which shape our histories and experience (Mezirow, 1978).

Separation strategy: With separation strategy, individuals place a value on holding on to their original culture, and at the same time wish to avoid interaction with others (Berry, 2008).

Strategy: The notion of strategy is based on the view that at the cultural level, the two groups in contact (whether dominant or nondominant) usually have some notion of what they are attempting to do (e.g., colonial policies). At the individual level, people vary in their cultural group (e.g., based on their educational or occupational backgrounds), and in their families, people vary according to their gender or position (e.g., mother or son).

Sufficiency: Sufficiency implies available alternatives in migrants' home environments are good enough for the migrant, and staying at home does not imply leading an unbearable or unacceptable life (Ottonelli & Torresi, 2013).

Transformative learning: Transformative learning is the process by which one transforms their taken-for-granted frames of reference (e.g., meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mindsets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective, so they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove truer or more justified to guide action (Mezirow, 2000). It also involves a particular function of reflection and reassessing the presuppositions on which beliefs are based and acting on insights derived from the transformed meaning perspective that results from such reassessments. This learning may occur in the domains of either instrumental or communicative learning (Mezirow, 1978).

Temporary protection status: Migrants with temporary protection status are from “designated countries to reside legally in the United States for up to 18 months, during which time they are eligible for employment and travel authorization and protected from deportation, though they are not granted permanent residency or citizenship” (Roy, 2022, para 9).

Voluntary migrants: Voluntary migrants are individuals who move from their countries of origin because “they are seeking better economic and social conditions than are available in their home country; while they might not be displaced by war or famine, one could argue that they are forced to move because of circumstances that are beyond their control” (Cassidy, 2004, p. 1). Ottonelli and Torresi (2013) described four conditions that voluntary migrants must achieve for their migration to be considered voluntary: (a) noncoercion, (b) sufficiency, (c) exit options, and (d) information.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

This phenomenological study aimed to explore the lived experience of Latino voluntary migrants seeking to acculturate to the United States. The research questions guiding the study were:

1. What are the lived experiences of migration of Latino voluntary migrants seeking to acculturate to the U.S.?
2. How does migration lead to transformative learning in the context of acculturation?

The literature review serving as the foundation to this study included (a) transformative learning, (b) acculturation theory, (c) culture shock, and (d) meaning making and sense making of voluntary migrants. These topics offered the appropriate balance to understand the meaning-making processes through the lived experiences of Latino voluntary migrants.

Fostering Learning in Adults

Fostering impactful and tailored learning experiences for adults means that it is crucial to understand the philosophical and theoretical foundations of adult education, which involve recognizing the individual characteristics and life experiences that influence the adult-learning process. In the current changing environment, there are challenges related to globalization, new technological advancements, and mass migration. Demographic shifts across nations, cultures, and diverse ethnic groups have become the norm, and it is crucial to understand these factors to effectively address the needs of adult learners. More recently, exacerbated by the COVID global pandemic, these conditions have redirected adults and learning facilitators to explore new methods to help learners make sense of their experiences in ambiguous spaces and complex

situations. By embracing these challenges and valuing the role of prior learning, life experiences, reflective practices, and self-directed learning, educators can create a bridge between theoretical concepts and practical application “to engage educator, learner, process, and context in meaningful ways” (Merriam & Bierema, 2013, p. 258), resulting in lifelong-learning practices that can promote new learning in adults.

Transformative Learning Theory

Mezirow’s work advanced the understanding of how adults develop new meanings from their experiences by integrating elements from humanistic, critical, and constructivist philosophies and the learning processes associated with them (Elias & Merriam, 2005; Illeris, 2009; Merriam & Bierema, 2013; Mezirow, 1991; Taylor & Cranton, 2012). Thus, examining the intersections of these philosophical foundations shows Mezirow’s theoretical roots and highlights how they have contributed to the complex and multifaceted nature of adult learning.

Philosophical Foundations

Mezirow’s transformative learning theory emerged as a framework that can be used to explore the essence of adult learning and provide insights into how individuals engage in deep and meaningful learning experiences. As such, transformative learning theory can be used to develop learning by exploring life experiences. It promotes reflection as a practice for individuals who question their beliefs, later experiencing perspective change, eventually transforming their way of being (Cantron, 2016; Elias & Merriam, 2005; Merriam & Bierema, 2013; Mezirow, 1991, 2000; Taylor & Cranton, 2012), providing the foundation for emerging practices and producing change in the system at large.

Humanistic Philosophy

The humanistic philosophical tradition emphasizes the capacity for self-directed learning, stressing individuals' autonomy and innate motivation in their learning journeys, underlining the individual learner's agency, freedom, and potential for ongoing development (Elias & Merriam, 2005), accounting for individuals being able to make their own decisions, having unlimited developmental capacity, and the "implied notion that individuals are responsible for themselves and others" (Taylor & Cantron, 2012, p. 6). Likewise, humanist traditions recognize the importance of creating a supportive, learner-centered environment that encourages self-discovery (Cantron, 2016); thus, in addition to being the drivers of their own realities, learners are empowered to access their unique capacities and embrace their personal development journeys.

Constructivist Philosophy

In constructivist philosophy, the learner has an active role in creating meaning from experiences, suggesting that knowledge is constructed through interaction with the environment and reflection on those interactions. Although constructivism is not a theory of learning (Merriam & Bierema, 2013), its principles involving the active construction of knowledge and meaning by learners are central to transformative learning because it helps "to engage in the transformative processes of critical self-reflection and reflective judgement through discourse" (Illeris, 2009, p. 99). Mezirow (1991) shared, "specific constructivist assumptions underlying transformation theory include a conviction that meaning exists within ourselves rather than in external forms" (p. xiv). Thus, learners must critically reflect on their assumptions, beliefs, and perspectives to reconstruct or transform their meaning frameworks in response to new experiences. Therefore, learners are active drivers in constructing and reconstructing their understanding of the world.

Critical Philosophy

At its core, critical philosophy is about examining ideologies aimed at addressing social inequalities to transform oppressive systems. It can be used to critique and improve societal structures by uncovering how they maintain injustices (Elias & Merriam, 2005; Merriam & Bierema, 2013; Mezirow, 1991; Taylor & Cantron, 2012). Learners must reflect critically on their socialization, cultural beliefs, and assumptions to foster social integration of those pursuing meaningful learning and, by implication, transformation (Cantron, 2016; Mezirow et al., 2000; Taylor & Cantron, 2012). The inquiry into how adults construct meaning has prompted scholars to study learning from experience, broadening the scope of research on transformative thinking, its core principles, and its relevance in adults.

Emergence of Transformative Learning Theory

Mezirow (2008) introduced the concept of transformative learning in 1978 in his article “Perspective Transformation,” aiming to explore how adults evaluate and reinterpret their previously learned assumptions. This inquiry initiated the foundation for what would later be recognized as transformation theory. Mezirow’s work was influenced by philosophers such as Paolo Freire, Jürgen Habermas, and Thomas Kuhn. Habermas’s work on instrumental and communicative domains of learning was of particular interest to Mezirow (2008) because it explored how adults “learn to negotiate and act on our own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others” (p. 8).

Mezirow (1994) described “the process in which adults learn to make meaning” (p. 225), explaining that the process is “focused, shaped and delimited by our frames of reference [or] two-dimensional meaning structures [namely] meaning scheme and meaning perspective” (p. 223). These structures represent the “result of ways of interpreting experience” (Mezirow, 2000,

p. 16), highlighting that adults transform their taken-for-granted frames of reference (i.e., meaning perspective, habits of mind, and mindsets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally, capable of change, and reflective (Mezirow, 1991, 2000).

Adults' interpretations of experiences are influenced by their reflection on either the "content or process of a problem" (Mezirow, 1994, p. 225) or the "reflection on the premise of the problem" (Mezirow, 1994, p. 225). Instrumental learning is about "learning to control and manipulate the environment or other people, a task-oriented problem solving to improve performance; [while] communicative learning is about learning what others mean when they communicate with you" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 8), requiring an assessment of "the meaning behind the words of others since we need to become critically reflective of the assumptions of the person communicating" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 9) the message. This shift from seeking absolute truths to establishing "the validity, or justification, for our beliefs" (Mezirow, 1994, p. 225) through rational discourse marks a departure from traditional learning to a nuanced understanding of this shift (Dirkx, 1998).

Phases of Transformation

When contrasting new learning with transformative learning, it is helpful to categorize new learning as instrumental learning due to its emphasis on the acquisition of specific knowledge or skills through direct instruction or experience. In contrast, transformative learning is characterized by its impact on individuals' frames of reference, shifting their beliefs and assumptions, and ultimately leading to a change in perception. While instrumental learning enhances the learner's existing skills and understanding in a given framework, transformative learning challenges the foundations of that framework by expanding on the depth of the learning process as one that allows for a comprehensive re-evaluation of oneself and one's relationship

with the world (Dirkx, 1998; Elias & Merriam, 2005; Merriam & Bierema, 2015; Mezirow, 1991, 2000; Taylor & Cantron, 2012).

Understanding of meaning making from experience “through reflection, critical reflection, and critical self-reflection” (Dirkx, 1998, p. 4) is at the core of Mezirow’s work. This examination reveals that perspective change can occur as a result of “a series of dilemmas or in response to an externally imposed epochal dilemma” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 168). Moreover, Mezirow (1994) explained that the most significant learning involves critical premise reflection about oneself through 10 phases:

1. A disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame
3. A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions
4. Recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
6. Planning of a course of action
7. Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plan
8. Provisional trying on new roles
9. Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
10. A reintegration into one’s life based on conditions dictated by one’s new perspective

The relationship between the phases and disorienting dilemmas is central to understanding the catalyst nature of the entire transformative process. These challenging events initiate this journey by confronting the learner with a situation that cannot be resolved using their

existing frames of reference. This connection emphasizes disorienting dilemmas as the starting point for a journey of personal growth.

Disorienting Dilemmas

Disorienting dilemmas facilitate the active construction of meaning and the exploration of diverse perspectives, aligning with the constructivist approach that links learners with interpretations of their experiences. By emphasizing personal growth and self-actualization, the concept of disorienting dilemmas aligns with humanistic principles of the importance of individual development and fulfillment. Also, these dilemmas connect to critical theory's emphasis on challenging societal norms and structures, encouraging learners to question and rethink established social paradigms. Through the lens of these foundational approaches, disorienting dilemmas can be leveraged as tools to navigate and learn from experiences.

Triggering the transformative learning process, disorienting dilemmas prompt learners to self-examine assumptions, realizing the universalities of their experience and looking for new ways to explain the matters they are analyzing. This reflective journey enables learners to make choices aligning with their evolved beliefs and facilitating growth, development, and personal fulfillment, displaying the impact of engaging with disorienting dilemmas in the pursuit of learning and self-discovery (Elias & Merriam, 2005; Fuhr et al., 2017; Merriam & Bierema, 2013; Taylor & Cantron, 2012).

Transformation and Emotions

Facing disorienting dilemmas can evoke intense emotions, leading individuals to reconsider perspectives, reflect, and gain new insights. Emotional experiences may significantly impact one's transformation journey by inspiring reflection on challenging events. The power of emotions cannot be underestimated, as they play a vital role in people's lives. Emotions, when

embraced as an asset for personal development and self-reflection, facilitate the integration of cognition and learning. Recognizing the role of emotions in learning affirms their value and enhances Mezirow's theory by positioning emotions as an integral part of learning and transformation processes (Carter & Nicolaides, 2023; Damasio, 1994; Dirkx, 2008; Mälkki, 2019).

Exploring the emotional dimension of transformational learning contributes to adult learning literature by connecting reason and emotion with biology (Carter & Nicolaides, 2023; Damasio, 1994; Dirkx, 2008; Mälkki, 2019; Taylor, 2001). Damasio (1994) explained, "Biological drives and emotions can noticeably influence decision-making [and] sometimes emotions give rise to irrationality in some circumstances, [but] they are indispensable [for each] other" (p. 192). Therefore, the impact of emotions on transformative learning is crucial and cannot be ignored. Emotions are interconnected with our physical responses, which in turn affect our perceptions and reactions to experience.

To truly grasp the learning process, one must acknowledge the significant role of emotions by incorporating "aspects of the experiential, whole person, and embodied learning" (Dirkx, 2008, p. 15). Recognizing and acknowledging emotions' role in shaping relationships with the world is crucial. To dismiss their powerful influence on the learning process is to limit understanding of how people interpret their experiences and learn. Dirkx (2008) explored the complex relationship between emotions and learning, noting that these connections are "often manifest neurophysiologically through the body" (p. 15), playing a critical role in how individuals establish connections while giving meaning to their experiences. This perspective introduces a nuanced understanding of how emotions, particularly edge-emotions, can trigger the transformative learning process as one faces disorienting dilemmas. This insight underscores the

importance of integrating emotional experiences into the framework of transformative learning, offering a more holistic approach to understanding and facilitating deep, meaningful change.

Edge-emotions “move forward the conversation about critical reflection” (Mälkki, 2019, p. 60). Mälkki (2011) highlighted these “unpleasant emotions that arise when our assumptions are being challenged” (p. 60), leading to disorienting dilemmas, as a person is forced to question their beliefs and are “pushed out of comfort zone, to face unpleasant emotions” (Mälkki, 2011, p. 36). Awareness of positive and negative emotions enables a responsiveness to physical reactions to disorienting dilemmas because these crises “begin the process of transformation from our effort to understand that which contradicts our own previously accepted presuppositions” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 168). Mälkki (2011) argued that to overcome disorienting dilemmas, one should “learn to embrace edge-emotions, consciously [to] elaborate and hardness on them and even harness them to develop our meaning perspective” (p. 60). These intense emotional experiences that occur at the limits of one’s “comfort zone” are markers that may be used to access learning. In this respect, edge-emotions aid by signaling that beliefs and assumptions are being disrupted (Mälkki, 2011), shifting one to critically reflect and explore new possibilities and meanings. This journey leads to expanded understanding, personal growth, and the construction of new meanings to gain a sense of self in relation to the world in transformative ways (Damasio, 1994, 1999; Mälkki, 2010, 2011, 2019; Taylor et al., 2016).

Transformation and Embodied Learning

Investigating other ways of learning includes the emotion–body relationship and its reaction to a new experience because “learning starts with experience and experience stimulates the embodied brain” (Taylor & Marienau, 2016, p. 59). As Damasio (1994) explained,

Emotions are the combination of a mental evaluative process, simple or complex, with dispositional response to that process ... resulting in an emotional body state, but also toward the brain itself (neurotransmitter nuclei in the brain stem), resulting in additional mental changes. (p. 139)

These reactions to disorienting experiences become integral to examining meaning-making and sense-making through the lens of *embodied knowledge*.

Embodied knowledge is the basis of “our familiarity with the world and with other people. It is a knowledge and skill which is realized in perceiving and reacting to situations, without needing targeted attention or memory” (Thomas Fuch, 2016, p. 226). Michelson (1998) shared, “Experience is itself located in the body as well as in the social and material locations that bodies invariably occupy” (p. 217). Understanding how the body reacts to different situations is necessary to learn and interact effectively with the environment. Moreover, the ability to perceive, identify, and recognize these reactions is crucial, as it develops comprehension and awareness of the body–environment relationship.

In the transformative learning theory literature, learning in relation to the body is implied. Clark (2012) claimed, “Knowing is not a simple cognitive process; we also know in and through our bodies” (p. 426). Dirkx (2008) explained, “Transformative learning theory incorporates embodied learning” (p. 15), yet even in learning through the body, “the body cannot speak for itself, so we must develop a language to enable it to speak in a way we can understand” (Clarke, 2012, p. 427). A person can tap into the potential of learning through their body and emotions to gain insights, as they physically engage with the world.

Transformation and Identity

In the transformative learning literature, Knud Illeris is recognized as a scholar of identity. His work suggests that transformative learning and identity “can mutually enrich each other and lead to new understanding in both areas” (Illeris, 2014, p. 148). Illeris (2014) explained,

The first need to take into consideration is that the term for the target area of transformative learning must, in a balanced way, cover all dimensions of human mental capacity and learning—that is, the cognitive, the emotional, and the social dimensions—as well as situatedness and societal and environmental embeddedness (p. 151).

In transformation learning, identity combines individuality and sociality to explain how others’ perceptions affect the perception of self. Illeris (2014) leaned on the work of Erik Erikson, considered the founder of modern understanding of identity. Illeris (2014) said identity has a connection to the “psycho-social context [because it covers] both the internal personal experience of being the same in all the different situations of life, and the totality of how we relate to and wish to be perceived by others” (p. 577). To comprehend a transformative learning experience from the social and individual context, it is necessary to look at “the person, the individual, and the learner” (Illeris, 2014, p. 151).

Transformation and Culture

The connection between identity and context emerged as a critical dimension for deepening understanding of transformative learning in relation to cultural experiences. Mezirow (1991) explained that culture can “encourage or discourage transformative thought” (p. 3). Erichsen (2011) described the “back and forth between harmony and disharmony, [where] different aspects of identity are renegotiated/negotiated, and one shift between various levels of

learning” (p. 125). Consequently, culture acts as a catalyst to exploring transformative learning, as individuals grapple with the challenges of being in unfamiliar environments. Individuals are tasked with integrating new experiences into their own stories to understand their existing self-concepts. Navigating in-between spaces in new cultural contexts forces individuals to evaluate their identities, prompting critical self-reflection to make sense of the experiences.

Building on the exploration of how cultural contexts influence identity and transformative learning, Edward Taylor’s (1994) work offers a bridge between theoretical insights and empirical evidence. He presented a comprehensive study connecting these concepts and proving “a substantial link between intercultural competency and the theory of transformative learning to shed light on the learning process of becoming intercultural competent” (Taylor, 1994, p. 389). This link was a significant development because the study explored the learning process in a new cultural environment and showed “transformative learning theory has substantiated through empirical research a learning theory indicative of a perspective transformation” (Taylor, 1994, p. 406). The study successfully connected the dots between theoretical frameworks in intercultural learning contexts, showcasing the practicality of the theory in addressing real-world challenges.

Taylor (1994) expanded research about culture and transformative learning by explaining how intercultural competency was explored for years using various terms, such as “cross-cultural adjustment, cross-cultural awareness, cross-cultural effectiveness, multiculturalism, intercultural effectiveness, cultural competence, intercultural competence, and intercultural communication competence” (p. 390), which all focus on learning new skills. He explained that the intercultural transformation process

is about evaluating the related terminologies such as culture shock, sojourner adjustment, cross-cultural adaptation, cross-cultural adjustment, intercultural identity, intercultural sensitivity, and intercultural transformation [because] these concepts examine what a stranger undergoes—mentally, physically, and behaviorally—in becoming intercultural competent (Taylor, 1994, p. 391).

This explanation presents intercultural competency and adaptation as being built on the process of intercultural experience and, as a result,

This process is often viewed in two ways: (a) that of a problem approach to understanding a stranger's transition into a new culture and (b) the learning/growth approach. [The learning approach focuses on intercultural transformation, while the problem approach focuses on] the inability of the individual to settle in foreign lands (Taylor, 1994, p. 391).

Perspective transformation in a cultural context presents an immediate opportunity to explore how a new environment, such as migration, can trigger new learning. Eschenbacher (2020) explained that a significant amount of research has been done to explore the “transformative dimension of adult learning in the context of migration” (p. 371). Nevertheless, there is still a need to know how transformative learning can facilitate the process of learning and adaptation of migrants as they settle in their host country. In this respect, the acculturation theory (Berry, 1997) offers a way to explore the learning process through the migrant experience.

Critique of Transformative Learning Theory

Although transformative learning theory is praised for its profound contributions to adult education, it has not been immune to critique. These critiques involve several aspects of the theory, such as its applicability and underlying premises of the nature of change, definition, and

impact on the individual and society at large. Researchers have explained transformative learning is cognitive, emotional, relational, spiritual, unconscious, and semiconscious; is tightly related to not only what one knows, who they are, and how they relate to others; and does not incorporate demands to collective social action (Boyd, 2008; Clark & Wilson, 1991; Collard & Law, 1989; Cranton, 1992; Dirkx, 2006; Shan et al., 2017). While transformative learning theory remains a foundation in adult education, its scrutiny demonstrates the learning process's complexity, and highlights the theory's evolving nature, as it integrates different dimensions of the human experience.

Hoggan (2023) emphasized the importance of recognizing change in transformative learning, arguing that “specific instances of transformation need to be articulated, as obviously no single instance of learning and change will encompass the entirety of what is possible” (p. 448). This argument implies the need for a clear definition of transformative learning, challenging the notion that transformation is universally recognizable. Newman (2012) suggested that “transformative learning does not exist [because] it can only be verified by the learners themselves ... [who] say they have undergone a radical change” (p. 4). This perspective challenges the core assumption of transformative learning, calling for the elimination of the term *transformative* and arguing that all forms of learning fundamentally involve aspects of change. Furthermore, it suggests that acknowledging the intrinsic nature of learning removes the need for individuals to resolve dilemmas because such dilemmas become nonexistent (Newman, 2012). This argument critically examines the uniqueness and conceptual definition of transformative learning, calling into question its distinct identity in the broad educational discourse.

Taylor (2001) identified the limitations of an approach that relies excessively on critical reflection, thereby downplaying the significance of feelings and emotions and overlooking the

transformative potential of unconscious thoughts and actions (p. 219). This emphasis on cognitive processes has led researchers to examine the vital role that emotions and feelings play alongside cognition in the transformative learning process (Carter & Nicolaides, 2023; Clark, 2012; Damasio, 1994; Dirkx, 2008, 2012; Mälkki, 2019; Taylor, 2001; Taylor & Marienau, 2016). This conversation suggests that transformative learning involves a complex interplay of cognitive, emotional, and unconscious elements, challenging and enriching Mezirow's original framework to present a more holistic view of the human experience in learning.

Mezirow's theory has been widely influential in adult education, emphasizing the role of individual critical reflection and rational discourse in fostering personal transformation; however, several scholars have critiqued the theory for its heavy reliance on Western, individualistic philosophical traditions and its failure to adequately address the sociocultural context and non-Western ways of knowing (Clark & Wilson, 1991; Hart, 1990; Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006; Ntseane, 2011; Tennant, 1993).

Clark and Wilson (1991) suggested that transformative learning theory emphasizes decontextualized rationality, which fails to consider the inherent nature of learning within social, cultural, political, and historical contexts. Johnson-Bailey and Alfred (2006) highlighted the theory's failure to adequately incorporate race, gender, and power dynamics—essential elements in the transformative learning processes of marginalized groups, particularly Black women educators. Tennant (1993) challenged the universal applicability of Mezirow's framework, suggesting that it neglects the socially constructed nature of adult development, which can differ significantly across various cultural contexts. Ntseane (2011) advocated for a culturally sensitive approach to transformative learning, underlining the communal and collective dimensions that are prevalent in non-Western cultures and often overlooked in Mezirow's theory. Hart (1990)

examined the limitations of critical theories, such as Mezirow's, in addressing broad emancipatory needs and deep sociocultural dynamics that shape the learning experience. Hart emphasized the need for a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between individual transformation and societal change, suggesting that transformative learning should incorporate a more explicit recognition of cultural and structural influences. These critiques collectively reveal a significant gap in the ability of transformative learning theory to resonate with the educational values and practices of non-Western societies, where learning is often a communal activity intertwined with spiritual and collective responsibilities. The theory's Western-centric bias, focusing primarily on individualism and rational critical reflection, may limit its effectiveness and its relevance in diverse global contexts.

While transformative learning theory has significantly advanced the understanding of adult learning, the critiques it has encountered require consideration and expansion of its conceptual boundaries. These critiques underscore the complex nature of learning and signal transformative learning theory's ongoing evolution. As new insights from emotional and relational dimensions are integrated, the theory is adapted, yielding different realities of human growth and learning. This ongoing dialogue enhances the field, opening the door for a deep, inclusive understanding that resonates with diverse happenings, such as the migrant experience, in which new learnings are context dependent.

The Migrant Experience

Exploring adult learning, with a particular focus on transformative learning theory in everyday experiences, has directed my research toward understanding how cultural change influences learning, especially through the lens of migration. As societies evolve, the interaction between diverse cultures becomes inevitable, forcing different cultures to interact. This

transition, however, presents challenges for migrants who may suffer a “culture shock precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse” (Oberg, 1960, p. 177). Understanding the complexities of cultural adaptation and its impact on the learning processes of individuals navigating these transitions becomes critical.

Acculturation Theory

Furham (2012) explained that migrants often encounter disorientating experiences, as they find “that the perspectives, behaviors, and experience of an individual or group or whole society are not shared” (p. 1). Consequently, their experiences are “filled with contradictions as they attempt to reconcile the demands of two (or more), frequently incompatible, worlds” (Cupsa, 2018, p. 305). Acculturation theory provides a constructive approach to understanding how individuals focus on the changes in their behaviors and beliefs to adapt to a new culture. In addition, acculturation facilitates understanding of the cultural distance between two societies: (a) origin and (b) settlement. The constructive approach helps explore the complex dynamic of cultural adaptation, offering a framework to understand the relationship between culture and behavior and enabling migrants to learn and adapt to new cultural environments (Berry, 1990, 1992, 1997, 2006).

Transitioning from this initial understanding of acculturation’s role in cultural adaptation, Redfield et al. (1936) explained acculturation as a phenomenon that occurs when “individuals from different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups” (p. 149). According to Berry (1997) and Webb (2015), the evolution of this concept highlights that in practice, acculturation tends to induce more change in one group than in the other, making the traditional definition a “neutral” concept, where the expectation of cultural competence predominantly falls on migrants.

Sam and Berry (2006) presented assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization as four strategies to explain migrant adaptation processes. These acculturation strategies “have been shown to have substantial relationships with positive adaptation: integration is usually the most successful, marginalization is the least, and assimilation and separation strategies are intermediate” (Sam & Berry, 2006, p. 51). Delgado and Sun (2022) referred to these as a “two-way dimensional acculturation strategy for migrants [since these are] “strategies for migrants within a host culture and that culture’s corresponding response strategy” (p. 115). From the point of view of the migrant (nondominant group), these factors occur “prior to and during acculturation can act on the process and outcome of migrant’s adaptation” (Kuo, 2014, p. 21).

The first strategy, *assimilation*, occurs when immigrants adopt the host culture and discard their heritage culture. The second strategy, *integration*, occurs when immigrants adopt the host culture, while retaining their heritage culture. The third strategy, *separation*, refers to migrants intentionally rejecting the host culture and retaining their heritage culture. Finally, *marginalization* occurs when immigrants reject both the host and the heritage cultures (Berry, 1997; Delgado & Sun, 2022).

In the context of the United States, voluntary migrants “are acculturating multidimensionally to three or more cultures simultaneously due to plural sending and receiving contexts” (Ferguson & Birman, 2016, p. 404). As a result, those entering the new cultural environment may experience *acculturative stress* as a response to life events embedded in intercultural contact (Berry, 1970). Berry (2006) said, “These reactions include heightened levels of depression (linked to the experience of cultural loss) and of anxiety (linked to uncertainty about how one should live in the new society)” (p. 43). The acculturation theory shows migrants’ coping strategies to these events “act as the critical ‘mediators’ between stress (in the ‘central

phenomenon' step) and the adaptation outcomes (in the final 'consequences' step)" (Kuo, 2014, p. 23). Therefore, by using the acculturation and transformative learning theory, which "provides a distinctive perspective to understand migratory experience in the light of transformation" (Eschenbacher, 2020, p. 371), it is possible to explore the strategies voluntary migrants use to explain "how individuals who have developed in one cultural context manage to adapt to a new context that results from migration" (Berry, 1997, p. 9).

Culture Shock

Kalervo Oberg (1960) introduced the term *culture shock*, which Cupsa described as an illness or "an occupational disease of people who have been suddenly transplanted abroad. [And] like most ailments, it has its own etiology, symptoms, and cure" (p. 184). He detailed the process as being triggered by the anxiety "from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse [which helps navigate] situations of daily life" (Oberg, 1960, p. 177). Since its inception, culture shock has evolved as a series of steps migrants experience as they transition into a new cultural environment.

Expanding on Oberg's definition, Peter Adler (1975) described culture shock as the emotional response to the "loss of perceptual reinforcements from one's own culture, to new cultural stimuli which have little or no meaning, and to the misunderstanding of new and diverse experiences" (p. 13). He argued this transitional experience is not exclusive to those exposed to a new culture, and it is "most readily understood in cross-cultural experiences where psychological, social, and cultural differences are the most distinct" (Adler, 1975, p. 13), such as the those with cultural distance, such as individualist–collectivist systems.

Cupsa (2018) explored the impact of culture shock on an individual's identity and invited reflection on the social implications of culturally diverse encounters. She introduced the stages of

culture shock—(a) honeymoon, (b) disintegration, (c) reintegration, (d) autonomy, and (e) interdependence—originally conceptualized in Oberg’s (1960) work. Cupsa showed the development of the culture shock process as one in which migrants navigate feelings “from hopeful to disorienting and painful, hostile and angry to empathetic, to belongingness and acceptance ... frequently experienced, normal, and unavoidable” (Cupsa, 2018, p. 189) for those transitioning into a new cultural environment.

Culture Shock Phases

The migration journey starts with the *honeymoon* phase, which includes an intentional change, accompanied by feelings of joy from the expectations of a positive move. Cultural differences between the home and host countries become noticeable as time progresses. These differences, considered disorienting events, are characterized by migrants questioning their identities.

There is a shift in the reaction of migrants to unknown encounters from joy and happiness to confusion and disorientation, marking the second phase of the culture shock process, *disintegration* (Cupsa, 2018). As individuals enter the second phase, experiences associated with missing home and a sense of familiarity, misunderstandings with locals, a growing sense of inadequacy, and increasing difficulties in interpreting the cues that translate social interactions (Adler, 1975; Cupsa, 2018; Oberg, 1960; Ward. et al., 2008) create a feeling of “disorganization, isolation, and psychic pain” (Hull, 1979, p. 34). This “complex state of mind dominated by confusion and disorientation” (Cupsa, 2018, p. 187) or “a sense of crisis” (Oberg, 1960, p. 179) causes newcomers to blame themselves for their inability to fix the problems they encounter. In addition, they may feel shame for not understanding what is expected of them in the host country. As a result, newcomers feel a “frequent rise in anti-social behavior, general acting out,

and [having] impulsive decisions to return home” (Hull, 1979, p. 34). If overcome, they stay; if not, they leave before reaching “a stage of a nervous breakdown” (Oberg, 1960, p. 179).

As some migrants overcome a decision to return home, they transition to the *reintegration* phase—though this shift does not translate into the acceptance of the host country. Adler (1975) explained that during this phase, there is a disconnection, where “each person is forced into [a] redefinition of some level of his or her existence” (p. 14). Therefore, migrants’ identities become vulnerable because they feel personally responsible for all their failures and inabilities to overcome problems. In some cases, Cupsa (2018) explained, “Migrants may feel physical pain” (p. 187), without knowing its origin, implying that the challenges could have a psychological nature.

The overwhelming amount of new cultural input leads to feelings of anger and hostility, which typically manifest as a rejection of the host country. (Cupsa, 2018; Oberg; 1960, Ward et al., 2008). Therefore, “the degree to which the individual has prepared himself internally for the move, and the amount of external support he receives” (Hull, 1979, p. 34) will determine the extent of the migrants’ adaptation as they overcome their resentment.

The reintegration phase of the culture shock process continues until migrants’ perceptions of their experiences change. Therefore, solving cultural challenges is key to their progression, which “forms the basis for developing new aspects of identity” (Cupsa, 2018, p. 188). This new development allows them to move to the autonomy phase because if they cannot resolve them, they experience a regression to the second phase.

As migrants progress, they develop balance and no longer feel their identity is vulnerable. This change in perception marks the complete advancement into the *autonomy* phase, characterized by developing new perspectives, skills, and understandings of one’s identity. In

addition, migrants feel comfortable navigating both cultural contexts without help, while becoming empathetic and aware of themselves and others (Adler, 1975; Cupsa, 2018; Ward et al., 2008).

Although the final phase of the culture shock process is *interdependence*, scholars have agreed this phase is not the end (Adler, 1975; Cupsa, 2018; Oberg, 1960): “to the contrary, it is a state of dynamic tension in which self and cultural discoveries have opened up the possibility of other depth experiences” (Adler, 1975, p. 18). This phase is described as one in which migrants combine multiple aspects of their “identity and [form] a multicultural (or bicultural) identity” (Cupsa, 2018, p. 189). Therefore, migrants’ abilities to incorporate their cultures into their everyday lives “can give them a stronger sense of self that can help their successful transformation” (Kuo, 2014, p. 345), as they adapt to the host culture.

Learnings

Drawing parallels between cross-cultural adaptation and the transformative learning process allows for careful examination of each period in the voluntary migration experience. This is important because transformation results from the “efforts to understand a different culture with customs that contradict our own previously accepted presumptions” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 168). Mezirow and Marsick (1978) found “for perspective transformation to occur, a painful reappraisal of our current perspective must be thrust upon us” (p. 12). Thus, sociocultural experiences become trigger events prompting the exploration of presumptions about home and host countries’ norms, values, and traditions. Illeris (2014) explained,

People do not transform elements of themselves or their identities if they do not have serious reasons [internal, external, or both] to do so ... but analytically, the important

thing is that transformation needs strong motivation and cannot be expected to occur without this. (p. 583)

Thus, voluntary migrants “must feel safe and develop a basic trust [with members of the host country] ... which means [they] need to allow and treasure differences” (Cupsa, 2018, p. 190) [by showing] “openness and positivity to overcome even the most difficult situations” (Robinson & Scott, 2021, p. 500). As such, when they expand their relationships, they “become a recognized member of the community, [resulting in the formation of a new community identity creating a sense of] belonging to that culture” (Peter et al., 2016, p. 96).

Although the adaptation process may be challenging, painful, and hard to experience, learning from trigger events linked to migration experiences means that “learning through meaning schemes and perspectives are essential for the culture of learning” (Lyon, 2002, p. 6). From this perspective, the migrants must “overcome personal limitations and difficulties and develop qualitatively new possibilities” (Laros et al., 2017, p. 186) to obtain the necessary learning to integrate fully into a country.

The adaptation of a voluntary migrant is a social, cultural, psychological, and personal development journey surrounded by “complex, demanding, emotional and stressful [events that] can also be a transformative, positive and supportive experience” (Hogan & Hogan-Kloubert, 2022, p. 99). From the transformative learning theory perspective, examining disorienting dilemmas, trigger events, and cultural transitions enables further research on the role of emotions and learning. Merriam and Bierema (2013) explained, “Mezirow has acknowledged, emotions, intuition, context, and relationships play a role in the transformational learning process” (p. 85). Using these experiences allows examination of the learnings associated with trigger events linked to sociocultural experiences and serving as catalysts to form new identities, facilitating a

sense of belonging. In this sense and in this context, the disorienting nature of culture shock provides a lens to facilitate our understanding of cross-cultural interactions, which are essential for the self-development and personal growth (Adler, 1975) of voluntary migrants.

Meaning Making in the Volunteer Migrant Experience

Navigating the meaning-making process in the journey of voluntary migrants presents a significant challenge to those unfamiliar with such experiences and the migrants themselves. Navigation often leads voluntary migrants to compare the worth of their struggles with the benefits, re-evaluating their decisions to leave their home. In this critical phase, they seek to reconfirm their own identities “in the face of new linguistic, perceptual, emotional, and cultural learning” (Adler, 1975, p. 22), as new cultural understanding is developed. This type of learning “provides a hopeful framework through which to understand the ‘glory’ of ambiguity and the potential that stands ready within its discovery” (Nicolaidis, 2015, p. 194), which is embedded in the migration experience. By embracing the premise that ambiguity and complexity lead to new ways of learning and understanding, it becomes evident that meaning-making for voluntary migrants can be studied by exploring the nuances of their transitional experience. Adler (1975) noted it is through engaging with these “emotions that each must come to understand experientially, [and] in doing so, learning, self-awareness and personal growth take place” (p. 22).

Social Interactions

The social context in which a voluntary migrant enters the host country influences their understanding and interpretation of their new environment. As they navigate these culturally different worlds, the “social unsureness and the degree of cultural difference, often

overwhelming, [leads] to a loss of confidence” (Lange, 2015, p. 634) and can only be overcome with the help of members of the host country and reflective practices.

As voluntary migrants emerge from “deep cultural questioning and battles with emotions, desires, and values [they arrive at a new understanding and learn] to constantly adjust strategies, be sensitive, and decode meanings, all through a reflective process” (Lange, 2015, p. 634). On the one hand, cultural context uncertainties force them to question their frames of reference through critical self-reflection; on the other, the social context allows dialogue and validation of new understanding to support the construction of new meaning. Therefore, the sociocultural context of interaction and the relationships built with host country members can help explore the meaning-making process of voluntary migrants.

Belonging

Belonging is another concept that can help understand how meaning-making happens in the volunteer migrant experience. Defined as the feeling perceived “by the need to establish close and safe ties that generate a sense of security, care, and affection” (Peter et al., 2016, p. 95), *belonging* is a bond in which individuals find common ground to understand everyday life experiences. Gomes and Mejia (2020) explained, “Building a sense of belonging and a home-away-from-home requires being part of a community where members identify and rely on each other for emotional and practical support” (p. 89). To understand their new cultural environment, voluntary migrants must achieve a sense of belonging by establishing close connections with members of the host country, having interactions that produce a feeling of confidence and safety, and relying on these relationships when grappling with cultural challenges during their transitions.

Belonging plays a significant role in voluntary migrant experiences because it allows them to build a support network and generate their group and cultural identity. Nevertheless, belonging “has a transitory characteristic since it follows individuals’ social, cultural, and emotional state in that place, with that group, and at that time” (Peter et al., 2016, p. 96). Thus, belonging is not a static quality but a constantly evolving one that can be shaped by a person’s experiences and interactions in different contexts, providing support mechanisms to cope with rejection from the host country.

Identity

The successful adaptation of voluntary migrants is “fundamental to personal identity and can underpin all aspects of learning and development” (Brown & Bimrose, 2018, p. 253). Their ability to gain confidence in navigating culturally different environments is crucial because “more direct contact with the host culture forms the basis for developing new aspects of identity” (Cupsa, 2018, p. 188). Therefore, understanding the process of identity formation is vital as it directly influences an individual’s “cognitive development (sense making) and emotional development” (Brown & Bimrose, 2018, p. 2,62), playing a significant role in self-perception.

For voluntary migrants, navigating multiple identities creates uncertainty because their identities are “located in the spaces between two places: home nation and settler nation [creating] a cultural dissonance as subjects attempt to negotiate flexible citizenship” (Gomes & Mejia, 2020, p. 90). This positioning can lead to the integration of various elements of one’s identity to better understand their place in a group and different cultures. Consequently, voluntary migrants find themselves adapting to behaviors and embracing “the pathways in which others would accept them” (Webb, 2015, p. 80) to form new identities with the collective identity of their new environments.

Empirical Analysis

A small empirical analysis was conducted on six studies to explore the available literature and understand the relationship between migrants, transformative learning, and the acculturation process. An empirical table displaying the relevant studies can be found in Figure 2. As a result of the analysis, several factors linking these topics are worth noting. For instance, the questions of the studies suggested their goals were getting a better understanding of the migrant's lived experiences, their learning process, and their identities in relation to their beliefs. Also, the theoretical frameworks included transformative learning with a combination of acculturation and cross-cultural adaptation theories.

The methodology used in all studies was qualitative research. The data was gathered by conducting in-depth interviews, except for one study, which used a duo-ethnography approach. Most interviews were recorded and transcribed, while two others used essays, logs, and journals to gather the data. The average sample size used in the six studies selected was 15 participants, and a sampling of male (with a mean age of 42) and female (with a mean age of 44) participants. The actual participants total in the studies varied between two and 36. One article did not explicitly list the number of participants; however, from the number of countries of origin named in the study, there were at least six individuals who could be included in the average totals.

Participants in all studies reviewed were skilled migrants who arrived in Canada, the United States, Australia, and South Korea. The origin of the participants of the six studies varied between Africa, Asia, and the Americas. Across all the articles, the connecting themes were migration, transformation, learning, and culture. Moreover, although supporting mechanisms for migrants were presented in these studies, not all directly stated the role of a coach or mentor as the support received. In addition, although most findings were about migrants' learning, it is vital

to recognize the reciprocal learning between mentors and migrants (see Table 1). Shan and Butterwick (2017) showed that by examining the experiences of the mentors, they recognized that structured mentoring programs can have a “transformative social change by moving toward a two-way approach to integration, where the mentors are made learners as much as the migrant newcomers” (p. 2).

Table 1*Findings of Empirical Analysis*

Author (s)	Title	Theories	Data Collection	Host Country	Key Findings	Gap	Fit with Current Study
Delgado & Kuo (2014)	“Challenges, Changes, and Choices: Immigrant Academics of Color in American Academia”	Acculturation theory	Semistructured interviews	United States	Struggles of cultural disequilibrium	The need to continue to refine practices and policy making	Ways to identify migrants’ challenges
Shan & Butterwick (2017)	“Transformative Learning of Mentors from an Immigrant Workplace Connections Program”	Transformative learning theory	Semistructured Interviews	Canada	Transformation of self and others with the potential to lead to social change	The need for sustainable mentoring programs	Evaluate the lived experience of adult immigrants, and if the data supports it, create an intervention to help them adapt
Webb (2015)	“Learning to Be Through Migration: Transformation Learning and the Role of Learning Communities”	Transformative learning theory	In-depth Interviews	Australia	Migrants’ informal learning was socially situated. Self-reliance was strong in finding the correct information	The need for the adult educator to support immigrant integration.	Addressing different opportunities available for documented vs. nondocumented immigrants. Also Identify the intervention mechanism to support learning for adult immigrants transitioning

Author (s)	Title	Theories	Data Collection	Host Country	Key Findings	Gap	Fit with Current Study
Kim (2008)	“Communication Experiences of American Expatriates in South Korea: A Study of Cross-Cultural Adaptation”	Cross-cultural adaptation theory	Personal interviews	South Korea	The host country’s knowledge, understanding, and language can help process adjustment and the need for adaptation.	Lack of training programs culture specific	Build intervention mechanisms to facilitate a culturally specific transition.
Webb & Lahiri-Roy (2019)	“Skilled Migrants and Negotiations: New Identities, Belonging, Home and Settlement”	Theoretical frames: sociology, postcoloniality, cultural studies, and education	Observations	Australia	Socioeconomic status of the migrants, their gender, ethnicity, and educational backgrounds Lack of assimilation due to feelings of exclusion and social position	Need to create adequate policy support for new migrants	By conducting research on a specific migrant population and providing insight into the beneficial outcome for the host society and the immigrant
Ghosh & Chaudhuri (2022)	“Immigrant Academic Mothers Negotiating Ideal Worker and Mother Norms During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Duo-Ethnography as a Co-mentoring Tool for Transformative Learning”	Transformative learning theory	Essays and personal journals	United States	Internalized cultural norms helped me survive as an immigrant. Reflection led to questioning previously learned assumptions.	Systems-level understanding of how supportive relationships from work, family, and community	Provide insight into the type of support that immigrants need to adapt

Key Findings

The outcomes of the studies in the empirical analysis demonstrated two types of findings (see Table 1). The first type of results is those related to the individual and specific purpose of each research. The others present a connection between the studies. Among the key elements linking them, the few pertinent to my investigation were the importance of migrants understanding the cultural context of the host country, in many cases by knowing “how to access information in their new social space” (Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2022, p. 77) and how learning happened among the participants of each study.

When it comes to the ability of migrants to learn about their new cultural context, the studies seem to concur with Mezirow’s (1991) conception of the adult learners’ experience:

Rather than merely adapting to changing circumstances by more diligently applying old ways of knowing, [adult learners] discover a need to acquire new perspectives to gain a more complete understanding of changing events and a higher degree of control over their lives. (p. 3)

The studies collectively showed that it was important for migrants to understand their new environments’ cultural context and expectations for a successful transition. Otherwise, they could show a “cultural disequilibrium in the acculturation process causing stress and an intense emotional and mental strain resulting from host culture interaction” (Delgado & Sun, 2022, p. 116). As a result, the transition into the new country challenges the newcomer.

Another connection in the findings of these studies was that among all participants, learning was taking place simultaneously between the migrants and the members of the host country who interacted with them. The different investigations used similar language to make this connection, implying that interaction with migrants generated new learning opportunities.

Shan and Butterwick (2017) said analysis of the mentor's exchanges with migrants showed "two types of transformative learning took place: transformation in the ways related to the self, and transformation in how they related to others, which sometimes lead to social changes" (p. 8). Also, Webb (2015) explained, "Migrants' informal learning was socially situated, rather than the outcome of an individual process of cognition invoking the idea of communities or groups of people sharing experiences and learning through a common purpose" (p. 68).

Finally, the last connection made was that new learning from the interaction of migrants could also extend to generating social change. This was evident as the finding presented the evolution of resources available to assist migrants arriving in the host country. All studies explicitly described the finding as an opportunity to seek further policy changes among organizations, government agencies, and educational institutions; however, this same supporting mechanism in the finding presented gaps that every article named as a need for those looking to expand the body of knowledge seeking to help migrants adapt.

Theoretical Framework

The theory of transformative learning and the acculturation theory highlight the early years of life as being a critical period for individuals because it is then that "meaning perspectives are acquired in childhood through the process of socialization, often in the context of an emotionally charged relationship with parents, teachers, or other mentors" (Mezirow, 1990, p. 3). As such, individuals learn their culture, language, social cues, and beliefs in addition to creating assumptions about their environment. These preconceived assumptions later influence abilities to accept, reject, or make meaning because "migration constitutes different life-shaking incidents or triggering events in the host country, prompting one to reinterpret previous life-views and personal beliefs" (Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2022, p. 91).

Connecting Theories

Integrating transformative learning and acculturation theory into a theoretical framework offers deep insights into the experiences of voluntary migrants, as they navigate the complexities of adapting to a new culture. Central to this framework is the concept of culture shock, which triggers a critical reassessment of personal and cultural identities and causes strong emotional reactions. These emotional responses are important to understand, as they can familiarize migrants with their physical reactions, signaling the need for reflection on the experiences that precipitate these responses. As migrants process these emotional and physical signals, they start on journeys of identity formation. Their development of identities emerges because of sociocultural dilemmas due to contradictions between the home and host cultures' beliefs and norms. At this point, "transformations become a learning experience" (Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2022, p. 90), generating new learning.

Using transformative learning and acculturation theory in a theoretical framework offers the opportunity to gain insight into the experiences of voluntary migrants, as they navigate the complexities of adapting to new cultures. This awareness of bodily and emotional reactions can be used to understand the intersection of transformative learning processes prompting migrants to engage deeply with the process of acculturation and embark on a dynamic, reflective, and transformative journey of identity formation. Therefore, deconstructing this approach enriches understanding of the migrant experience, illustrating how emotional and bodily awareness can guide the development of new perspectives and deeper cultural connections.

Literature Gaps

Several studies reveal gaps in understanding learning in the migrant experience, particularly calling for action by adult educators. Webb (2015) argued adult educators need to get

involved by accepting their “role to play in supporting migrants who create new learning opportunities through social networking and encourage these learning communities to respect and recognize diverse cultures and identities” (p. 80). Similarly, Delgado and Sun (2022) said, “Adult educators and administrators must embrace their roles and responsibilities in supporting positive acculturation experiences” (p. 120). Hoggan and Hoggan-Kloubert (2022) said, “Future research may explore the learning opportunities and support services provided for adults with migrant backgrounds by educational institutions and workplace learning contexts” (p. 101). These gaps show clear and active evidence of the need to understand learning from migrant experience and for adult educators to be proactive in supporting newcomers.

Another gap presented among these studies is the lack of policies in the host countries, organizations, and educational institutions engaging with migrants, as they become active members of the host country. Delgado and Sun (2022) asserted, “Continued refinement of practices and policymaking in varied contexts to ensure equity” (p. 120) for educational institutions welcoming migrants is needed. Furthermore, Kim (2008) emphasized the importance of training programs, suggesting a focus “on knowledge and understanding of the host culture communication systems” (p. 519) and highlighted how the lack of such understanding can adversely impact individuals, underscoring the need for cultural orientation and communication skills development for migrants. Echoing these concerns, Hoggan and Hoggan-Kloubert (2022) called for reflection on this issue “as a potential departure point for developing modes of transformative learning and institutions of transformative education ... [that] can explore migration with individuals, groups, communities, and societies in critically reflective, democratic, and emancipatory ways” (p. 28).

The third gap identified in the literature is the absence of effective support systems for migrants. This deficiency was consistently highlighted across studies, which identified potential sources of support including family members, mentors, spouses, and individuals from the host country. For instance, Webb and Lahiri-Roy (2019) highlighted that creating enough support for newcomers “is an important step in ensuring that migrants negotiate their identities into hybrid ones in the soonest possible timeframe to enable a mutually beneficial outcome” (p. 203). Also, Fiorito (2021) stated that despite being a documented Latino migrant, they “experience survivor guilt, ontological fragmentation (i.e., identity loss or confusion), and a desire to use their privilege to give back” (p. 1,107), implying that as members of host country, they wanted to support others. Shan and Butterwick (2017) described this giving back and mentoring as a challenge in which the biggest hurdle was to “systematically build the transformative potential of mentoring programs in a sustainable manner” (p. 13).

The gaps in the research related to migrants’ experiences in adult education are crucial to emphasize the importance of understanding how voluntary migrants learn. This understanding is necessary for adult educators to proactively create learning environments that recognize the challenges faced and the identities voluntary migrants bring. Equally, there is a clear call for the development of policies and practices in host countries and institutions that welcome migrants and actively support their integration and learning process. These gaps highlight the role of learning in facilitating adaptation and integration. Addressing these gaps with informed educational strategies and policy reforms can foster environments that support migrants’ learning journeys and enrich the host country.

Addressing Research Gaps

As more people transition to the United States, it is important to understand how voluntary migrants develop the fundamental skills to navigate the culture and society they enter (Bosswick & Heckmann, 2007, p. 10). Exploring the lived experiences of voluntary migrants would expand knowledge about critical self-reflection in relation to transformative learning in a new culture.

Exploring migrants' experiences, which acculturation theory refers to as *cultural disequilibrium* and Mezirow called a disorienting dilemma, future research can map a connection to find similar elements that facilitate learning. Also, knowing how each approach the concept of culture in the context of communication and identity allows opportunities to understand the importance of verbal and nonverbal cues and hierarchies, as voluntary migrants enter the host country and try to make sense of their new identities. Using transformative learning theory and acculturation theory to understand the voluntary migrant journey can leverage sociocultural experience to minimize disorienting dilemmas associated with cross-cultural experiences.

Chapter Summary

As an adult learner and voluntary migrant, I aim to understand how transformative learning occurs and identify its triggers and potential benefits for others in the adult education field. Mezirow's theory offers a foundational framework for examining the unique journey of voluntary migrants as they navigate acculturation challenges; however, to fully grasp the depth of cross-cultural experiences, an integration of acculturation theory is essential. This framework enhances our understanding of the struggles and needs voluntary migrants face during their transitions. Thus, by combining Mezirow's theory with insights from acculturation theory and considering the roles of emotional responses, embodied learning, and identity formation as a

result of the culture shock process, I can map a comprehensive investigation into the transformative learning experiences of voluntary migrants.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Scholarly Foundation in Exploring the Phenomenon

Qualitative research allows for numerous options for conducting a study. Relevant to this research are the phenomenological traditions. In general terms, this philosophical practice includes analysis of the subjective perception of an individual's point of view on everyday life. As a result, different branches of study, such as "sociology, communication, religious studies, and anthropology, have been shaped by intellectual figures" (Prasad, 2018, p. 17), challenging the simplest definition of phenomenology since not a single philosophical perspective can unilaterally define it. As Smith (2018) explained, phenomenology is distinguished by how "we describe a type of past experience, [how] we interpret a type of experience by relating it to features of its context, or [how] we analyze the form of a type of experience" (para. 14). The work of influential thinkers, such as Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Karin Dahlberg, has guided how researchers study phenomenon. I present these contributions in the following subsections.

Transcendental Phenomenology: Edmund Husserl

Referred to as the father of phenomenology, Husserl enriched "almost all areas of philosophy and anticipated central ideas of its neighboring disciplines such as linguistics, sociology, and cognitive psychology" (Beyer, 2020, para 1), all of which, in some aspect, related to the development of the phenomenological tradition. Husserl conceptualized a phenomenon of interest in his work by highlighting the importance of consciousness and the relationship between consciousness and the world. For him, "consciousness was always about something [but

most specifically about] the mind in relationship with the object of its consciousness” (Vagle, 2018, p. 7). In this sense, Husserl thought that a phenomenon was not found through cognition but would present itself through everyday intentional engagement with the object of consciousness. This concept came to be known in phenomenology as *intentionality* (van Manen, 1997).

Another concept in Husserl’s conception of phenomenology is *lifeworld*: “out of the notions of the natural attitude, where all science and research have its origin” (Dahlberg, 2002, p. 47) or “as the world of immediate experience, the world as already there, and the world as experienced in the natural, primordial attitude” (Tracy, 2020, p. 65). Lifeworld underscores the fundamental connection between the world and human experiences, emphasizing that the two are not distinct entities but interconnected aspects of existence. Therefore, to understand the world, individuals need to understand their everyday lived experiences, as they encounter them, in consciousness, “which is where the phenomenon takes place” (Vagle, 2018, p. 7), and without reflection.

Understanding the pre-reflective everyday human experience to avoid inserting biases and falling into “the trap of an absolute false–truth distinction” (Dahlberg, 2006, p. 15) was central to Husserl. For him, setting aside presumptions allows people to avoid justifying what they believe to be true and helps them discover the true essence of their experiences. Individuals should bracket or maintain their views and assumptions about the world separately.

In phenomenology, *bracketing*, also called *epoché*, relates to the predispositions researchers may have as they try to understand the lived experiences of participants. Therefore, to focus on the phenomenon, researchers must “bracket their biases” (Tracy, 2020, p. 65) to prevent their perceptions from affecting the study. This suspension of preconceived ideas allows

researchers to identify the phenomenon as the participants share their lived experiences, preventing their beliefs and backgrounds from influencing their views.

Following the phenomenon, as it presents itself, means that researchers understand the difference between natural and phenomenological attitudes. Vagle (2018) explained that Husserl viewed these attitudes differently because with the natural attitude, “we rarely question the existence of objects, things, people or ideas. While with the phenomenological attitude], we question what we typically take for granted” (p. 13). There is a movement from pre-reflection to actively seeking to understand the phenomenon, shifting from a natural to a phenomenological attitude, which would allow researchers to explore the phenomenon’s *essence*, another concept Husserl introduced. According to van Manen (2014), Husserl viewed phenomenology “as a descriptive philosophy of the essence [which] aims to capture the experience in its primordial origin without interpreting, explaining, or theorizing” (p. 89). Thus, getting to the essence means that researchers need to understand the structure of a phenomenon, which could be done through *reduction*.

Essence and reduction hold a close relationship in phenomenology. Essence is about understanding the phenomenon as it presents itself, while reduction is about how to get to the features that make a phenomenon. Reduction allows for this to happen through openness because with “this openness, insights may occur” (van Manen, 2016, p. 220), keeping researchers “deeply interested in that which makes the question possible in the first place” (van Manen, 2015, p. 43). Although Husserl differentiated between several kinds of reductions, such as eidetic, transcendental, psychological, and epistemological, van Manen (2016) explained, “it is hard to understand the real meaning behind Husserl’s reduction because his writings are difficult, seemingly convoluted, and abstracted” (p. 216). Nonetheless, Husserl’s idea of the mind over the

world and its focus on consciousness became known as *transcendental phenomenology* (Vagle, 2018) because it can be used to uncover the structures of consciousness that underlie human experience.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology: Martin Heidegger

Martin Heidegger laid the foundation for *hermeneutic phenomenology*, a perspective that emphasizes the interpretative dimension of human experience with the “humans’ use of language in context” (Tracy, 2020, p. 66). In hermeneutic phenomenology, there is a fundamental assumption that language serves as the primary intermediary through which experiences are articulated, suggesting “that qualitative researchers can valuably pay close attention to people’s stories and words” (Tracy, 2020, p. 66), as they try to make sense of experience.

Heidegger’s departure from Husserl’s premise lies in his conception of phenomena not merely appearing in consciousness but instead being “brought into being” (Vagle, 2018, p. 9) through exploration in the everyday living of the context of the surrounding world. Moreover, Heidegger viewed the mind and the world as one and connected, forming the foundation for interpreting human experience in its context. For Heidegger, phenomenological inquiry meant arriving “interpretatively in the world, and the world should not be bracketed but fully engaged” (Vagle, 2018, p. 9), as the context of realities profoundly shapes experiences.

In the context of research application, Heidegger departed from Husserl’s notion of bracketing preconceived assumptions. This separation signals a shift from understanding the meaning of an experience to understanding the meaning “of being in the experience” (van Manen, 2014, p. 226). This new conceptualization suggests that engaging with assumptions and preunderstandings of the world is vital, as they reveal the meaning in experiences, facilitating a deep understanding of human existence. This philosophical approach clarified that “the essence

of human understanding is hermeneutic, that is, our understanding of the everyday world is derived from our interpretation of it” (Dahlberg et al., 2008, p. 78).

The philosophical change from Husserl’s epistemology to Heidegger’s ontology signaled a shift in studying human experience. For Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology to get to the phenomenon, it is necessary to break the structure of our preconceptions and engage and interpret them to obtain an openness that allows the phenomenon to present itself. This *deconstruction* (van Manen, 2014) or *undoing* (Saevi, 2013) of the structure is facilitated by interpretation. As one considers the “ontology of the lifeworld, the invisible being-in-the-world structure becomes visible” (Dahlberg et al., 2008, p. 80): the phenomenon shows itself with the interpretation of an experience rather than showing up in consciousness. Thus, conducting research under Heidegger’s approach means that the researcher needs to understand and interpret the phenomenon in isolation in its context. In doing so, the researcher must engage with their beliefs to get a deep understanding of the meaning of an experience.

In the evolution of phenomenology, Heidegger’s contributions align with hermeneutics, as he emphasized interpretation as important when seeking to understand one’s experience of the world. Moreover, this evolution is evident in his nuanced approach to the concept of the lifeworld. Heidegger viewed the lifeworld as inclusive of the totality of one’s existence, rejecting the possibility of bracketing oneself out to understand a lived experience. As part of the world, “we always already are submerged in meaning” (van Manen, 2014, p. 108).

Hermeneutic Phenomenology: Hans-Georg Gadamer

Gadamer explored the lifeworld from Heidegger’s approach by determining that one must use language to interpret and understand a human experience in the world in its context. In his vision, “language is not just one of man’s possessions in the world; rather, on it depends the fact

that the man has a world at all” (Gadamer et al., 2004, p. 440). This connection is central to understanding an experience because, without language, one cannot interpret what is at the core of the experience (van Manen, 2014). Moreover, in Gadamer’s understanding, lifeworld is not something that can be attained using a “method, but rather in an open way [because] being in the world in which we belong opens the way of true understanding” (Dahlberg et al., 2018, p. 81). This idea is not external to consciousness but central to human understanding because “the world is presented to us in language” (White, 1994, p. 92). Thus, openness becomes fundamental in the phenomenological tradition because it facilitates a deep understanding of human existence.

In application to research, language serves as a tool, enabling researchers to explore questions and validate, “always as open-ended” (Saevi, 2013, p. 8), the understanding of the human experience. Simultaneously, the notion of understanding relates to language and openness, as it is through openness that individuals can situate meaning “in relation to the whole of our own meaning or ourselves in relation to it” (Gadamer et al., 2004, p. 271). Thus, to grasp the essence of an experience, researchers must maintain a perspective of openness and engage in reflection of their positionality, as they interpret and analyze the data. In this context, reflection emerges in phenomenological research to connect Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer, and Dahlberg. Husserl’s approach includes bracketing preconceived notions unbiased, while Heidegger presented reflection to uncover the structures of how to make deeper meaning. Meanwhile, Gadamer used language, openness, and reflection to explore the use of language, traditions, and dialogue to explore their influence on preunderstanding (Dahlberg et al., 2018; Prasad, 2018; Tracy, 2020; Vagle, 2018; van Manen, 1997, 2014). In this sense, to conduct research, one must remain receptive to new possibilities of understanding while constantly evaluating assumptions.

This approach enables an open dialog with participants as it allows new understanding to emerge through the exchange of language and dialogue.

Reflective Lifeworld Research: Karin Dahlberg

As the connection between openness, language, interpretation, and understanding evolved through Gadamer's work, a new branch in the phenomenological tradition emerged under Karin Dahlberg. Drawing from Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer, and Merleau-Ponty, Dahlberg applied their ideas specifically to the field of nursing. Unlike Husserl and Heidegger, who approached phenomenology from a descriptive or interpretative view, Dahlberg embraced both approaches, with an emphasis on Gadamer's concept of openness. She paid particular attention to the relationship to tradition, recognizing it as "the foundation in a cultural and personal sense [which] shapes our internal world of understanding as well as of feelings and thoughts" (Dahlberg et al., 2008, p. 82). These insights guided her to "lead the design" (Vagle, 2018, p. xv) of what is known as *Reflective Lifeworld Research* (Dahlberg et al., 2008).

Reflective lifeworld research is a phenomenological approach aimed at understanding the lived experience of individuals in their everyday world. This method contributes to the "interpretation of phenomenology in the context of human sciences scholarship and reveals the similarities between transcendental and hermeneutic (interpretative) phenomenology" (Dahlberg et al., 2008, p. 13). For Dahlberg et al. (2008), "we always experience the world as something, [and] the world always presents itself to us in the form of meaning" (p. 93). Therefore, to conduct reflective lifeworld research means to engage in an ongoing process of reflection and interpretation of assumptions, beliefs, and biases to enhance understanding of the meaning of individuals' experiences (Dahlberg, 1997, 2008; Dahlberg & Dahlberg, 2019; Finlay, 2019; Kozoll, & Osborne, 2004; Vagle, 2018). In reflective lifeworld research, researchers must

understand, continuously engage, and apply concepts such as bridling, meaning, openness, self-awareness, and reflection.

Bridling is a concept central to reflective lifeworld research. Unlike bracketing, bridling emphasizes the significance of letting personal experiences be part of the research process because it “allows the management of the everyday attitude so that a researcher adopts a scientific one” (Moodley, 2009, p. 2). In addition, bridling involves being attentive during the research process, while keeping a distance and reflecting on experiences to gain new knowledge about the lifeworld of others. It is a way of accepting and integrating preunderstandings, while staying objective and open to “keep them in check and reflect” (Dahlberg et al., 2008, p. 118) during the research process.

In reflective lifeworld research, the thoughts driving meaning, openness, self-awareness, and reflection work together to give existence to a new approach to research in human science. Dahlberg et al. (2008) crafted a way for new and veteran researchers to recognize the movement needed between preunderstanding, openness, and reflection to arrive at the phenomenon. Moreover, they explained that being in the world means we “cannot avoid meaning” (Dahlberg et al., 2018, p. 113), which is the springboard for the phenomenological tradition.

Lifeworld research aims at making “the phenomenon appear in a clear and comprehensive way” (Dahlberg et al., 2008, p. 113). Thus, researchers must bridle themselves by remaining attentive and open to reflecting on old beliefs as they engage with participants’ experiences to find the phenomenon. Therefore, seeing the uniqueness of a situation means new scholars could identify a phenomenon as it appears, ultimately arriving at the development of new knowledge. As such, making it a method “designed to illuminate experiences and phenomena in those professions that cater for care, well-being, and education” (Moodley, 2009,

p. 2), allowing me to adopt it to explore the lived experience of Latino voluntary migrants, as they acculturate to the United States.

Research Design

This study was conducted using phenomenological research. This method “seeks to describe the essence of the phenomenon by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it” (Teherani et al., 2015, p. 670). As such, it offers the appropriate dynamic to examine “how our words, concepts, and theories inevitably shape and give structure to our experiences as we live them” (van Manen, 2014, p. 58), providing the foundations to explore the lived experience of Latino voluntary migrants, as they acculturate to the United States. The research relied on the following questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of migration of Latino voluntary migrants seeking to acculturate to the United States?
2. How does migration lead to transformative learning in the context of acculturation?

These questions offer the appropriate balance to understand the meaning-making process of Latino voluntary migrants' lived experiences.

As part of the research design, I included details on the phenomenon of interest, methodology, key methodological concepts, participant selection criteria, participant recruitment, and data collection and analysis methods. I also included the underlying assumptions and concluded with a subjectivity statement. This comprehensive approach ensures a thorough exploration of the phenomenon to safeguard the validity of the research.

The Phenomenon of Interest

Voluntary migrants are individuals who move from their countries, seeking better “economic and social conditions available in their home country ... [and are not] displaced by

war or famine” (Cassidy, 2004, p. 1). Ottonelli and Torresi (2013) described the nuances of voluntary migration as a dynamic process characterized by having four conditions: (a) noncoercion, (b) sufficiency, (c) exit option, and (d) information. Given this comprehensive definition and the context of study, the phenomenon I examined was the lived experience of migration to the United States in the context of acculturation through the eyes of Latino voluntary migrants.

I was interested in this phenomenon because individuals may experience cultural transitions, adaptation, and learning differently. In addition, acculturation provides a contextual layer to examine learning caused by changes in a sociocultural environment. This path can be used to describe and illustrate “the everyday world in a way that expands our understanding of human experience” (Dahlberg et al., 2008, p. 49). As Vagle (2018) explained, the “contextual aspects that surround those living the phenomenon will need to be illuminated and explored” (p. 68) to have a better understanding of these experiences. Therefore, I dived into the complexities of this phenomenon because of the intersections of lived experiences, migration, and the learning of Latino voluntary migrants.

Key Concepts

Building on the foundation established by phenomenological research, which emphasizes the importance of understanding experiences from the perspective of those who lived them, I used lifeworld research as the methodology to use for this study. This decision was grounded in the need to explore the phenomenon in relation to my experience “to remain aware of my intentionality and unique perspective of the phenomenon” (Dahlberg et al., 2008, p. 141) and capture their nuances, as new learning emerges. Reflective lifeworld research stresses a particular engagement with its core concepts to conduct a study that meets the standards of

rigorous scientific inquiry. As such, I was introspective and understood my own experiences, while simultaneously exploring participants' experiences. This dual focus was vital in the discovery of the unique aspects of the phenomenon and the emergence of new learning. Scholars such as Dahlberg et al. (2008), Moodley (2009), and Vagle (2018) have highlighted the significance of this methodology, as one that enables a comprehensive exploration, in addition to ensuring the validity of the study.

Central to the practice of reflective lifeworld research is the practice of bridleing during data collection. As an acculturated Latina with firsthand experience of voluntary migration, I had to remain aware of my preconceived ideas to keep them from interfering with the participants' narratives. This process involved deliberately distancing myself from the phenomenon, allowing me to engage with the participants' accounts without bias. Openness is another principle of importance in this research methodology. Reflective lifeworld research presents various dimensions of openness, yet for this study, I embraced a holistic interpretation. To maintain openness throughout the research process, I embraced uncertainty during each research phase. Also, being open to participants meant being aware of the power dynamics inherent in my relationship with participants because sharing too much information about my experience could have influenced their recounting of events. Thus, applying intersubjective openness or holding back "as much as possible in favor of the experience of the informant" (Dahlberg et al., 2002, p. 112) was of interest, as I explored the phenomenon.

The pursuit of meaning was at the core of reflective lifeworld research in my inquiry. As Dahlberg et al. (2008) explained,

When we are open as lifeworld researchers, we are open to meaning [because] an open lifeworld research approach to research puts one in touch with deeper levels of meaning,

not as an attribute that we bring deeper levels of meaning to our research, but rather as a means of discovery of meaning. [Therefore,] meaning is directly related to understanding the phenomena. (p. 113)

This perspective aligned with my objective to uncover meaning and learning “in another light, [while being] changed by this new experience” (Dahlberg et al., 2008, p. 84), as I explored this phenomenon. Mezirow’s (1978) transformative learning theory deepens this search for meaning, as it allows for investigations of perspective change from a transformational experience “to understand the meaning-making process” (p. 108). Thus, it provides the theoretical foundation that informs the understanding of meaning-making while navigating the complexities of the phenomenon and guiding my methodological path.

As presented by Mezirow (1990), the use of “phenomenology and ethnomethodology as research methods” (p. 10) to understand a phenomenon is suggested to examine “how a different culture challenges preconceptions” (Mezirow, 1990, p. 10) associated with new cultural environments. Although Dahlberg et al. (2008) warned about following a prescriptive method to examine a phenomenon in reflective lifeworld research, by connecting Mezirow’s theory and using the tools from this methodological research practice, I conducted the study from a position of informed openness to uncover the interconnections between learning, identity, belonging, and change that characterizes the migration experience, to contribute to a broad understanding of the complexities involved in navigating new sociocultural environments.

Assumptions

This research is based on the assumption that the migration journey to the United States presents significant challenges for Latino voluntary migrants. It also assumes that successfully adapting to the host country depends on the migrants' ability to understand and navigate the

cultural nuances and social dynamics of their new environment. By understanding the cultural context in which they arrive, the integration of Latino voluntary migrants can be facilitated, resulting in a smoother acculturation process, enabling them to navigate the complexities of their new society, access resources, and establish meaningful connections with individuals from diverse backgrounds.

This study operates on the premise that the immigration process to the United States demands a comprehensive understanding of the cultural context to facilitate a more seamless transition for Latino migrants. By familiarizing themselves with the customs, norms, and expectations prevalent in the host country, voluntary migrants should be able to overcome the challenges they encounter upon arrival effectively. Such cultural awareness may enable them to bridge potential gaps, mitigate potential misunderstandings, and proactively engage in social interactions, leading to a greater sense of belonging, improved sociocultural adaptation, and increased opportunities for socioeconomic mobility.

Recruitment and Participant Selection

The target population for this study was Latino voluntary migrants living in the United States. My connection to the population and the phenomenon under study has guided me to focus on a group with whom I share cultural connections, linguistic understanding, and personal experiences. This positioning allowed me to engage with participants in Spanish and English, fostering an environment of openness and immediacy (Björk & Dalberg, 2013), which is vital for the authenticity and depth of the research.

As someone who has personally navigated the migration and acculturation process, my ability to practice openness is methodological and deeply personal. This dual perspective helped me maintain validity at the forefront of the study. As such, preserving an intersubjective

openness means that my “attention is not only given to the participants but also to the information being conveyed” (Dahlberg et al., 2018, p. 112). It is crucial to identify unique attributes of the phenomenon as they naturally emerge. Also, the practice of reflection is “the first step toward the objective development of awareness of the process that contributes to research and understanding” of the phenomenon (Dahlberg et al., 2018, p. 139). This enabled the authenticity of this study to remain present, while expanding knowledge from the lived experience of Latino voluntary migrants.

Selecting this population was also motivated by the noticeable gap in support available to Latino voluntary migrants upon their arrival and as they transition through sociocultural environments in the United States. Witnessing firsthand the lack of assistance available compelled me to investigate the lived experiences of other voluntary migrants. By “diving below the surface and finding the deeper underlying and intentional meanings” (Dahlberg et al., 2018, p. 115), this phenomenon opened this study to uncover integration strategies used by this group, highlighting the importance of understanding their unique challenges and needs.

Participants were recruited through community centers, educational institutions, and personal and professional networks. The outreach included emails, flyers, and word of mouth. The inclusion criteria to participate in the study were being Latino and the following:

- Nonnative English speakers
- Arrival in the United States without knowing English.
- Entrance into the country as young adults (18–29 years old).
- Living in the United States permanently for at least 3 to 5 years.
- Voluntary migration to the United States
- Having limited access to any Spanish-speaking population.

- Entering the country legally and currently holding a legal status as United States residents or naturalized citizens.

For this study, the age ranges were determined using the re-envisioned approach to Erik Erikson's development theory presented by Sacco (2013). This work proposed realigning the age ranges of psychosocial development to understand and determine when transitions occur in human development.

Participants Profile

The participants of this study were nine Latino voluntary migrants, each with unique migration experiences and diverse backgrounds. Their journeys reflect a range of personal stories, including varying lengths of time spent in the United States, different cultural origins, and distinct reasons for migration. Each participant shared valuable insights into the emotional, social, and cultural challenges they faced during their acculturation process. Their collective experiences provide a rich foundation for understanding the multifaceted nature of migration and the transformative learning that occurs as they navigate their new lives in the United States.

The participants came from diverse demographic backgrounds (see Table 2), representing a broad spectrum of age, gender, and socioeconomic statuses. The participants also varied in terms of educational levels, employment status, and family structures. This diversity provides a comprehensive understanding of the migration experience, as each participant brings a unique perspective shaped by their personal circumstances, cultural heritage, and the challenges they have encountered in adapting to life in the United States.

Table 2*Demographic Profile of Participants in the Study*

Pseudonym	Country of Origin	Latino Heritage	Age Range	Marital Status	Gender	Level of Education	Occupation	Years in the USA
Flor	Panama	Panamanian	40–49	Married	Female	Bachelor's degree	School Nutrition	21
Lisa	Panama	Panamanian	50–59	Married	Female	Bachelor's degree	HR Partner	28
Manuel	Venezuela	Venezuelan	40–49	Civil union	Male	Bachelor's degree	Unemployed	25
Cecilia	Mexico	Mexican	50–59	Married	Female	Master's degree	Teacher	34
Maria	Panama	Panamanian	40–49	Married	Female	Master's degree	Customer service representative	23
Alba	Panama	Panamanian	30–39	Married	Female	Bachelor's degree	Homemaker	10
Alexa	Panama	Panamanian	30–39	Single	Female	Bachelor's degree	Sales Support Professional	6
Estela	Ecuador	Ecuadorian	40–49	Married	Female	Bachelor's degree	Esthetician	18
Erika	Panama	Panamanian	40–49	Married	Female	Associate's degree	Banking Specialist	24

Flor

Flor and I first met in high school in Panama, but lost contact after I left the country. Many years later, we reconnected through social media and discovered that we now lived near each other in the United States. For our interview, we met at a local coffee shop, and having known each other previously helped her feel comfortable and trusted to share her story. Flor, a mother of two, initially opened up about her struggles in revalidating her degree in the United States, a challenge that deeply impacted her migration experience. She also communicated how valuable participation in the research was and the ability to share her experience, as she had never had the opportunity to reflect on her journey before because no one had ever shown interest in asking. Through this process, Flor expressed how much she had come to value her family's support after the loss of her father. She described her success in overcoming professional hurdles and building a thriving business with her husband after facing many

obstacles. Flor's story reflects resilience, transformation, and a deeper appreciation for family and personal achievements in the face of adversity.

Lisa

I met Lisa in Panama when I was a child, and although we saw each other sporadically, she always regarded me as someone she trusted. Married and a mother of two, Lisa shared her experiences with great pride, describing her ability to overcome the challenges she faced throughout her journey. She considered herself successful and defined her home as where her family is located. Due to the physical distance between us, Lisa's interview was conducted virtually. During our conversation, she described her migration experience as a journey in which she demonstrated the importance of being present and visible, ensuring that others recognize that Latinos are here to contribute to society. Lisa's reflections highlight her resilience, sense of purpose, and dedication to positively impacting others.

Manuel

I met Manuel as a colleague in an organization to which I was new. Although I was still adjusting, he generously shared his knowledge and was always willing to teach me the intricacies of the job to ensure my success. We lost contact after I left the company but stayed connected through professional social media networks. When I recruited for this study, I reached out to Manuel, who agreed to participate without hesitation. We met for the interview at a small restaurant. As he shared his journey from Venezuela, emotionally charged moments prompted him to reflect on experiences he had never considered before. He expressed his gratitude for the opportunity to participate, recognizing the importance of sharing his story to help others understand what it truly takes to succeed in this country. He also mentioned that he believed the

United States is not for everyone, acknowledging the complexity and challenges of adapting to life there.

Cecilia

I met Cecilia 21 years ago, and although we have known each other for many years, we had never had the opportunity to discuss her journey and the challenges she faced during her transition from Mexico to the United States. Due to our physical distance, we conducted our interview virtually, which allowed her to talk in the comfort of her home. Cecilia's migration journey was rich with fascinating details, and it was enlightening to learn about her purpose in helping new generations understand Latino culture. I was especially moved when she reflected on her experiences and compared them to those of others. What stood out the most was the joy she expressed when discussing the opportunities she has been able to provide for her children, thanks to the opportunities she received in this country. Her story highlights the challenges of migration and the fulfillment and pride that come from creating a better future for the next generation.

Maria

I met Maria in Panama, and although we knew each other, we did not have a close relationship. Maria is married and a mother to a young girl. At the time of the interview, she was a student and shared how education had played a key role in her success in the United States. Due to our physical distance, we met virtually for the interview. One of the moments that stayed with me from our conversation was when Maria thanked me for giving her a voice to share her experience. She reflected on the importance of others understanding what voluntary migrants go through, as they transition and adapt to the nuances of this country. Maria expressed that feeling

seen and heard throughout the interview was a remarkable experience, underscoring the significance of sharing her story and having her journey acknowledged.

Alba

Alba and I met a couple of years ago, and we conducted our interview virtually due to the physical distance between us. Originally from Panama, Alba's story was marked by a constant theme: the challenges she faced as a mother wanting to enter the workforce but lacking a support structure to help with her children. Despite these difficulties, Alba displayed incredible resilience. One of the most striking aspects of her journey was her determination to finish college, even after being repeatedly turned down for the revalidation of her classes by multiple schools. Despite these setbacks, Alba persisted, ultimately graduating after much struggle, showcasing her perseverance and strength in overcoming obstacles.

Alexa

Alexa is from Panama, and while I met her when she was little, we did not interact much until our virtual interview. Her journey was surprising in many ways, as she shared that upon arriving in the United States, she immediately focused on learning about the professional environment to get ahead. Although she discussed the challenges she faced, Alexa emphasized that the most important aspect for migrants is understanding what is needed to be successful in the workforce. She placed great importance on knowing what it means to be a "good worker," recognizing that this knowledge is crucial for thriving in a new country. Her focus on professional development and dedication to succeeding as a worker reflect her determination to adapt to her new environment.

Estela

Estela and I had never met before; another participant referred her to me to participate in the study. Originally from Ecuador, Estela and I connected virtually due to our physical distance. During our conversation, Estela discussed the challenges she faced as a mother, particularly in relation to not knowing the language. This detail was striking, and I had not considered it before, highlighting the additional hurdles many migrant parents face in their daily lives. Estela also shared she wished she had negotiated the amount of time she would spend in the United States, as she deeply missed her family in Ecuador. She acknowledged that returning to Ecuador could be challenging, as her children did not see her home country as their own. This reflection underscores the emotional complexity of migration, where family ties and the sense of belonging evolve.

Erika

Erika is from Panama, and although we had never met before, we connected virtually for this interview. During our conversation, Erika shared that her biggest challenge was letting go of her family. She described her journey as a beautiful love story, though she expressed her hesitation and loneliness in a new country alone. Despite these challenges, Erika spoke fondly of her close relationship with her in-laws and expressed her hope to return to Panama when she retires. Erika also shared that our conversation was a wonderful experience, highlighting that other migrants can learn from her story. She emphasized that to adjust, one must be open to change, a lesson she learned through her migration journey.

Data Origin

A total of 25 participants were recruited, of which 13 met the requirements. Three participants dropped out of the research due to personal reasons. Of the 10 remaining

participants, one was used to conduct a pilot interview to establish rigor and help discern and reformulate questions for this investigation, leaving nine eligible participants. Data from the pilot interview was not included in the study's analysis, report, or conclusion. The sample size of the investigation includes nine participants: eight women and one man, from Latin American countries such as Ecuador, Mexico, Panama, and Venezuela. Participants' ages at the time of arrival in the United States were between 19 and 28 years of age, with an average residency of 21 years. From the nine interviews, five participants decided to have their interviews in Spanish, while four shared their journeys in English.

Data Collection

Data was collected from semi-structured interviews and sequential diagramming. Semi-structured interviews ranged between 70 and 159 minutes, allowing for the efficiency, saturation, quality, and richness of the data in the study (Tracy, 2020). All semi-structured interviews were audio recorded and conducted in English, Spanish, or a mix of the two languages, based on participants' preferences. All interviews were transcribed, and Spanish and mixed-language interviews were translated using Sonix.ai (Version 2024). The transcription included a total of between 28 and 58 pages.

Although priority was given to in-person interviews, due to the location of the participants, seven out of nine were hosted virtually using WhatsApp. Questions were in English and translated to Spanish as requested for openness and immediacy (Björk & Dalberg, 2013). During the interview, participants switched between Spanish and English without interruptions to allow the interview to flow naturally and “transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence” (van Manen, 1997, p. 36). Words or concepts were clarified as requested in the

participant's preferred language, and only follow-up questions were addressed using direct messaging, texts, or phone calls.

As Vagle (2018) explained, "in reflective lifeworld research, the choices for data gathering are nearly limitless" (p. 69). Therefore, I incorporated a drawing technique presented in reflective lifeworld research. Dahlberg et al. (2018) explained, "Drawing is the midpoint between the lived experience and its verbal expression" (p. 164). Therefore, once eligibility was confirmed, and prior to the interview, participants were requested to draw a sequential diagram to capture the timeline of the migration journeys from their countries of origin to their current places in the United States. This timeline showed a chronological representation of their experiences, aiming "to record significant events and elicit the subjective feelings associated with them" (Bravington et al., 2019, p. 515). The sequential diagram timeline served as a supportive tool during the analysis, rather than being the primary focus of the interviews (see Figure 3 and Appendix B). The primary purpose of the interviews was to elicit emotions and memories from the participants, allowing them to share their experiences more organically. While the diagram effectively illustrated key events in their migration journeys and aligned with the reflective lifeworld research methods described by Vagle (2018), it was not used extensively during the interviews. Some questions were posed to clarify dates and times when participants mentioned events in a different sequence than what was outlined in the timeline. This approach ensured discussions remained centered on their emotional experiences, while leveraging the diagram as a reference to enrich the understanding of their narratives. The narrative highlighting process preserved the link between the participant's journey and the narrative of their experiences articulated in their own words. It also allowed for the identification of the

interconnected processes of the migration experience, illustrating how these transitions are not isolated events but parts of a broader, interconnected process.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis requires organization and preparation prior to starting the process, which demands “gathering, ordering, (re) labeling, printing, and sometimes formatting the data” (Tracy, 2020, p. 212). This process is recommended because when “using qualitative methods, researchers and research teams face daunting problems of organizing, collecting, managing, storing, retrieving, analyzing, and giving meaning to the information obtained during qualitative research” (Johnson et al., 2010, p. 1). As Tracy (2020) explained, qualitative data analysis “materials are precious, and carefully archiving them can streamline future analyses” (p. 212). Thus, the organizational structure included a single folder system for each participant. A separate subfolder was created inside their folder to keep consent forms, transcripts, and audio recordings. The transcription included raw text, a clean version of the text, a translated transcript, and a highlighted text from the data analysis. Transcriptions from the interviews included all “verbal cues (e.g., smiles, nods), extraneous words and utterances (e.g., hmms)” (Nasheeda et al., 2019, p. 3), body language, and nonverbal language to preserve the richness of the participants’ narratives.

Once the transcription was completed, data analysis took place. I completed the data analysis using the whole-parts-whole approach (Dahlberg et al., 2008; Vagle, 2018). This method is presented in Dahlberg et al.’s (2008) reflective lifeworld research, which draws on Husserl’s and Heidegger’s phenomenology, referring to the process as a movement to “understand the whole in terms of the details and the details in terms of the whole” (p. 186). Because this research aims to understand the lived experience of Latino voluntary migrants, as they

acculturate to the United States, this approach helped navigate the interplays between the description of the participant's migration journey and its interpretation in relation to my personal experience as the researcher. Furthermore, it was a way to make use of descriptive and interpretative phenomenology to "make focal meaning (e.g., moments) in relation to the whole (e.g., broader context)" (Vagle, 2018, p. 108) and illustrated the evolving "intentional relationship between me as the researcher and the phenomenon" (Kennedy, 2018, p. 27).

The initial phase began by listening to the audio recordings as a reminder of each participant's narratives, without taking notes, to gain a sense of the whole experience (Vagle, 2018; Dahlberg et al., 2008). This phase represented the descriptive or phenomenological approach, where an overall theme was recognized from each narrative. Next, I listened to each interview with the transcripts to ensure the text captured the conversation accurately. The next phase transitions into the "parts" with the readings, "questioning, note taking, annotating and identifying what is there" (Freeman, 2017, p. 122), while "turning into a journal to explicate some of the thoughts ... [or] bridling" (Vagle, 2018, p. 110) and reflecting on the interaction with the text (Gadamer et al., 2004). I approached the data this way to identify key components and themes that defined the phenomenon. I then compiled all the themes in a table, including relevant examples, and included line numbers from the transcripts and explanations for why each example aligned with its respective theme. At this point in the analysis, "the text is divided into meaning units that are condensed and abstracted to form subthemes, themes and possibly main themes, which are compared with the naïve understanding for validation" (Lindseth et al., 2004, p. 145). This examination presents the move into interpretative phenomenology, which becomes "important to understanding the relationship between analysis and interpretation" (Freeman,

2017, p. 123). Interpreting text means entering the “hermeneutical circle [in which] the whole can only be understood from its parts” (Prasad, 2018, p. 35).

I then distilled each theme into a descriptive word and provided a rationale for my selection. The final stage of the analysis is the return to the “whole,” where the material is organized after the back and forth with the text reaches saturation, and no new information about the phenomenon being studied is found (Dahlberg et al., 2008; Patterson, 2018; Seidman, 2006; Vagle, 2018). The material is thoroughly analyzed and understood in parts, and “the emerging and transformed meanings are linked together” (Dahlberg et al., 2008, p. 191) into a structure. This phase represents a transition back to descriptive phenomenology, where the general structure of the phenomenon is reached by synthesizing the transformed and clustered meaning units in such a way that the phenomenon is illuminated (Dahlberg et al., 2008; Lindseth et al., 2004; Vagle, 2018). Thus, data analysis ensures a deep and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under study, staying true to the principles of reflective lifeworld research.

As a final step, I reviewed the text and the terminology that shaped the phenomenon to assess whether the content supported the theories being employed in this investigation. Throughout this process, phenomenological reduction played a critical role, as it guided me to focus on the essence of the participants’ experiences by employing bridling techniques to manage my preconceived notions and biases. The analytical process was meticulously documented, allowing for revisions and refinements based on ongoing reflections. After the analysis, I completed a final reflection to capture my experiences and insights from the research.

Validity and Reliability

In the domain of phenomenological research, particularly within the reflective lifeworld framework, the validation of data analysis is fundamental in establishing the authenticity and

depth of findings. According to van Manen (2014), such validation is grounded in the evaluation of the originality of insights and the robustness of the interpretive processes employed in the study. Dahlberg et al. (2008) further highlight that in lifeworld research, exploring validity should extend beyond traditional quantitative measures and instead prioritize the meaningfulness and authenticity of the findings. This perspective emphasizes the necessity of genuinely representing lived experiences, where validity relies on a deep commitment to the phenomenon being studied and a rigorous, reflective analysis. Additionally, achieving objectivity and validity in this context necessitates openness, receptivity, and sensitivity to the phenomena under investigation, ultimately allowing the essence of participants' experiences and narratives to guide the research process. To enhance the validity of this study, excerpts from interviews or other forms of data were incorporated as illustrative examples.

In phenomenology, a core description that effectively captures the intuitive essence of an experience significantly bolsters validity, as it enables readers to engage in analytical development, making the findings more accessible and impactful (Dahlberg et al., 2008; FitzPatrick, 2019; Vagle, 2018). To this end, my reasoning as a researcher remained consistent throughout the study, presenting the continuous engagement with data rather than retroactively presenting my approach (FitzPatrick, 2019). To this end, a variety of strategies were employed. The practice of "bridling," as outlined by Dahlberg et al. (2008) and Vagle (2009, 2018), was particularly significant. This reflective approach involves deliberately slowing down the research process, meticulously managing preconceptions, and engaging thoughtfully with the evolving data. Bridling helped mitigate premature conclusions and fostered a thorough engagement with the data, thereby enhancing the overall validity of the findings. The refinement of the research began with a pilot interview, which helped ensure that the questions were effective in eliciting

deep insights relevant to the study's objectives. A pre-interview was conducted with participants to determine their eligibility, thereby maintaining the study's focus. Throughout the research process, member checking was employed to validate the findings, reinforcing the credibility of the interpretations with participants' lived experiences. Additionally, reflective briefing sessions were held after each interview, providing opportunities for dialogue and reflection on both the research process and the collected data. Analytic rigor was further enhanced using consistent and reflective research practices, the collection of rich data, the transcription of recordings, keeping sequential steps, and the inclusion of excerpts as examples from participants to maintain transparency while also bringing readers closer to the phenomenon being studied (FitzPatrick, 2019; Finlay, 2013; Vagle, 2019, van Manen; 2014). Finally, the collaborative sharing of data with colleagues, the research chair, and faculty members ensured that the analytic process was robust and benefited from diverse perspectives; in addition to incorporating an audit trail to meticulously maintain transparent documentation of the research steps and decisions made along the way, thereby strengthening the reliability of the conclusions drawn (Merriam, 2009). This adherence to the foundational principles of reflective lifeworld research ensured that the findings were valid and reliable and deeply reflective of participants' lived experiences, thus enhancing the overall authenticity of this study.

Subjectivity Statement

I am a Latina voluntary migrant from Panama. I was in my late teens when I arrived in the United States. I arrived in Connecticut and later moved to Massachusetts and then Georgia. Through the years, I have experienced the challenges and opportunities of the migration experience firsthand. Acknowledging my subjectivity as the researcher is critical for this investigation, especially considering its potential impact on interpreting the participants' lived

experiences of those participating in the study. My background and biases are likely to influence how I perceive and analyze the narratives. Thus, I shared my positionality to recognize that my interpretations are seen through the lens of my own cultural, social, and personal experiences. My academic pursuits may also shape these perspectives and engagement with migration discourse and may have influenced the formulation of research questions, study design, participant interactions, and narrative interpretations.

To mitigate the influence of my subjectivity and ensure the integrity of the research, I committed to a careful process of reflexivity throughout the study. This process entailed continuously examining my assumptions and biases in the researcher–participant relationship to provide a space where participants shared their stories without restriction. By staying open and aware, I maintained transparency about my positionality to prevent it from affecting the research outcomes. This commitment to reflexivity and transparency supported the study’s credibility, ensuring that participants’ nuanced and complex journeys are accurately represented.

Ethical Considerations

Ensuring the confidentiality of participants’ identities during the data preparation and analysis is a vital ethical consideration of this study. Thus, this study maintained the ethical principles of confidentiality and respect for participant privacy throughout the analysis process, maintaining trust and integrity in the research relationship. To that end, during this study, I protected all collected data by using pseudonyms for participants, which were employed as soon as data eligibility was confirmed. All transcription and related documents used in the analysis process are free of identifiable information that could reveal participants’ identities. Additionally, all physical and digital data were kept on password-protected computers, and any physical

documents were stored in locked cabinets with restricted access. All data discussions were kept confidential, preventing the sharing of information in any context that could accidentally lead to participant identification, including sharing data for peer review or during presentations.

CHAPTER FOUR

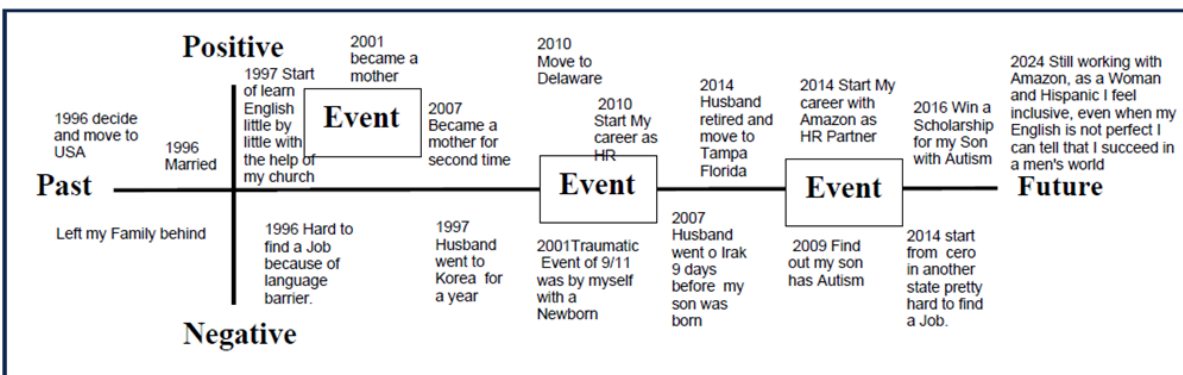
FINDINGS

This phenomenological study aimed to explore the lived experience of Latino voluntary migrants, as they navigate transitions and adapt to the cultural nuances of their new environments. The research questions that guided this research were:

1. What are the lived experiences of migration of Latino voluntary migrants seeking to acculturate to the United States?
2. How does migration lead to transformative learning in the context of acculturation?

Grounded in transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1978) and acculturation theory (Berry, 1992), this chapter reports on the findings of nine participants interviewed during May, June, July, and August of 2024. The data collection and analysis methods included a systematic and reflective process designed to capture the essence of participants' experiences as Latino voluntary migrants. Multiple rounds of listening to the interviews were conducted to ensure the accuracy of transcription and translation. This thorough method established a solid foundation for reliable analysis and an immersive engagement with the participants' narratives. A color-coding system was used to highlight text based on specific categories: one for specific questions and answers of interest, another for the migration journey presented in the narratives, and a third color to identify some theoretical content. Annotations highlighted ideas, concepts, or words of interest in the narratives.

The sequential diagram timeline (see Figure 3) was a supportive tool, rather than the primary focus, of the interviews. While the diagram effectively illustrated key events in their migration journeys and aligned with the reflective lifeworld research methods described by Vagle (2018), it was not used extensively; however, some questions were asked to clarify information when participants mentioned events related to the diagram.

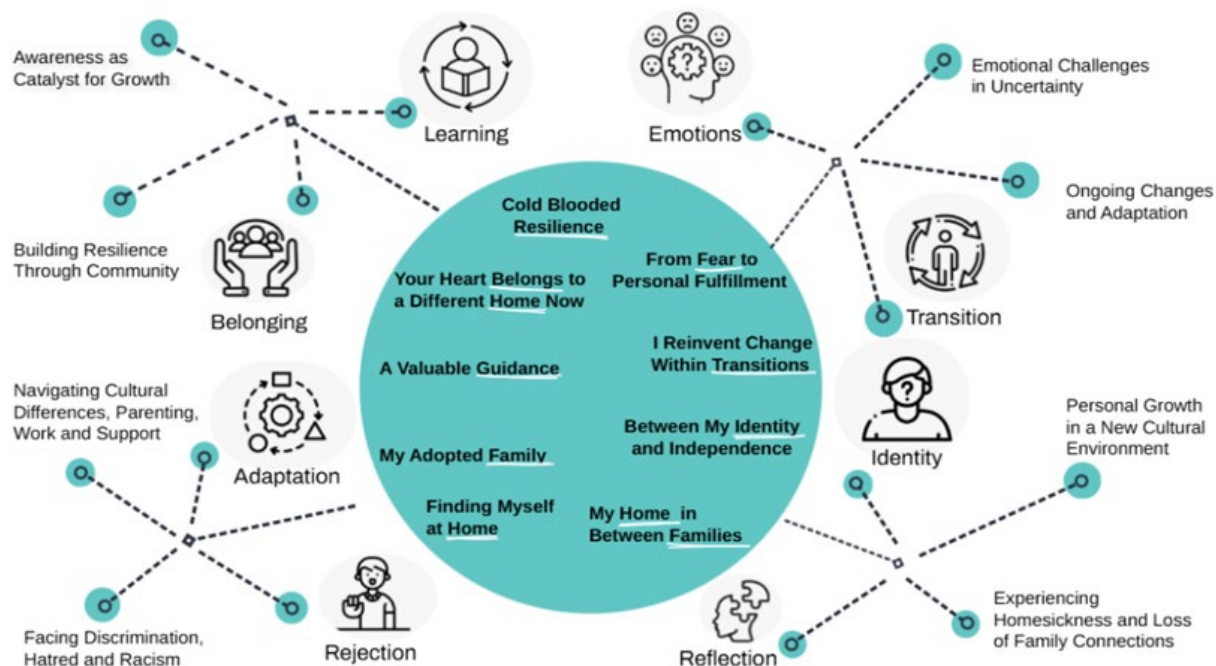
Figure 3*Sequential Diagram Timeline*

My interpretation of the analysis connects the sequential diagrams with a more profound understanding of the participants' narratives. These diagrams provide a foundational overview of the participants' migration journeys, highlighting significant events such as relocations between states, childbirth, job transitions, and other challenging experiences. Although structurally informative, the diagrams fall short of capturing the complexities and various dimensions of the participants' migration experiences. To address this limitation, I revisited the participants' narrative transcriptions, which offered rich, detailed accounts that expanded upon the information presented in the diagrams, multiple times, allowing me to make a move between the diagrams and the narratives, which allowed me to identify connections between themes, elements, and theories using the participants' voices. From all the diagrams and transcripts reviewed, eight themes and nine distinctive elements emerged, from which a connecting thread was identified as the element that linked all participants' lived experiences. Throughout this process, phenomenological reduction played a critical role, as it guided me to focus on the essence of the participants' experiences, and bridling helped manage preconceived notions and biases. The findings underscore the whole-part-whole approach (Dahlberg et al., 2008),

demonstrating that these experiences were not isolated events; instead, they represent components of a broader, interconnected process characterized by multiple elements that make up the phenomenon.

Naming Each Experience

These first-hand, untold stories represent the realities of nine individuals who ventured from the familiar into the unknown, providing initial insights into the phenomenon I investigated. Each narrative offers distinctive nuances that reflect the complex nature of migration. The foundation of this research began with the voices of my participants as they shared their journeys. I captured the essence of each experience by creating titles that honor them in their raw nature: (a) Between My Identity and Independence, (b) I Reinvent Change Within Transitions, (c) Finding Myself at Home, (d) My Adopted Family, (e) Cold-Blooded Resilience, (f) From Fear to Personal Fulfillment, (g) A Valuable Guidance, (h) My Home in Between Families, and (i) Your Heart Belongs to a Different Home Now. Naming these narratives allowed me to engage with them independently, preventing my personal experiences from influencing my analysis. As a result, themes began to emerge, connecting the participants to one-word descriptors that encapsulate the elements of the phenomenon. Within this framework, the underlined words began to reveal the connections between the voices of each participant, as represented in their titles; these emerging connections directly link the themes and elements that define the phenomenon of this research study (see Figure 4).

Figure 4*Naming Each Experience***Themes and Elements of the Phenomenon**

The findings of this phenomenological study offer a detailed exploration of the lived experiences of Latino voluntary migrants seeking to acculturate to the United States. Through the analysis of interviews with nine participants, eight central themes emerged, each representing a key aspect of their migration journeys. The eight themes that emerged from the participants' experiences capture the interconnectedness of the migration journey and the commonalities of these experiences. These themes were (a) Emotional Challenges in Uncertainty, (b) Awareness as Catalysts for Growth, (c) Building Resilience Through Community, (d) Personal Growth in a New Cultural Environment, (e) Ongoing Changes and Adaptation, (f) Navigating Cultural

Differences, Parenting, Work, and Support, (g) Facing Discrimination, Hatred, and Racism, and (h) Experiencing Homesickness and Loss of Family Connections.

In addition to the eight overarching themes, I identified descriptive words representing the nine elements that described the phenomenon in this investigation. These elements are crucial for conveying the participant's experiences and include (a) Emotions, which capture the deep feelings experienced by participants; (b) Learning, reflecting the acquisition of new skills and knowledge in unfamiliar contexts; (c) Belonging, highlighting the need for connection and community; (d) Identity, examining how personal and cultural identities evolve during the migration process; (e) Transitions, which focus on the significant changes encountered along the journey; (f) Adaptation, illustrating changes that individuals or groups made in response to the environmental demands and new circumstances; (g) Rejection, encompassing the challenges of exclusion and discrimination experienced; (h) Reflection, awareness of the importance of family connections and sense of loss in relation to their experiences; and (i) Home, as a connecting thread linking personal narratives, preconceive notions, and redefinitions in meaning crucial for understanding the complexities of the voluntary migration experience. These collectively address the core question of this study and show the complexities migrants face as they strive to adapt to new environments (see Figure 5).

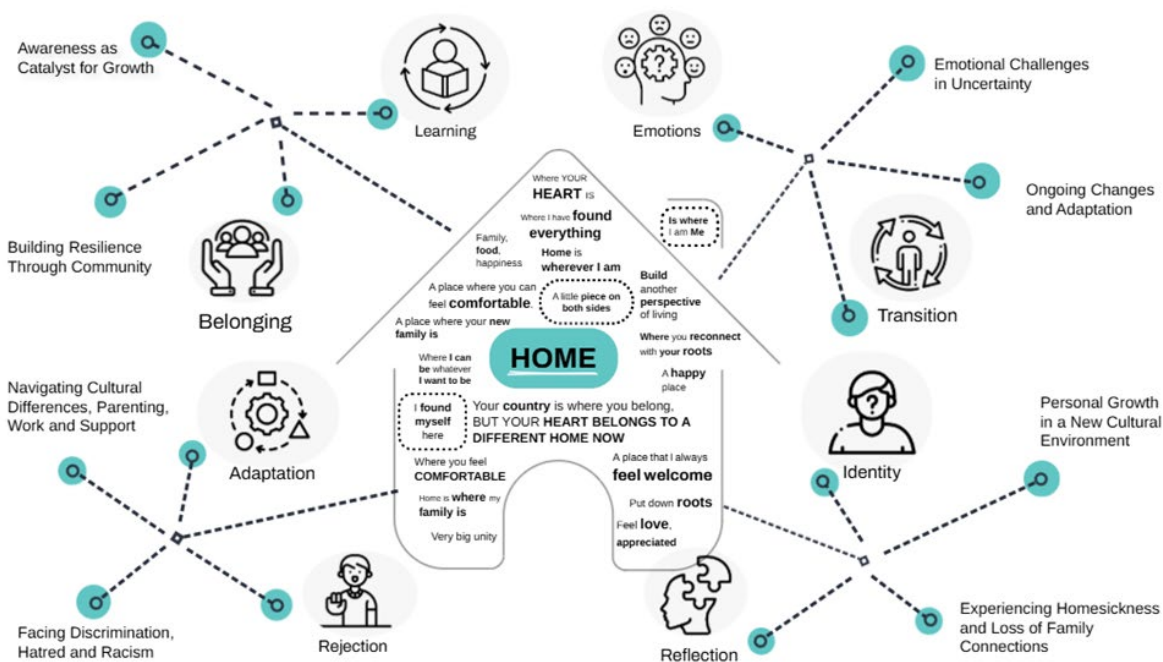
The Emergence of the Phenomenon

The emergence of the phenomenon in this study unfolded gradually, as I analyzed the participants' narratives. It was not revealed as a singular event but rather as an interconnected series of emotions, transitions, and challenges that participants encountered while navigating their new realities in the United States. Their journeys were shaped by the tension between holding on to the familiar, forging new identities, and seeking for belonging in a foreign

environment. As the analysis deepened, it became increasingly clear that these experiences extended beyond physical relocation; they encompassed profound personal transformations that fundamentally altered the participant's understanding of self in relationship to their new cultural environment and thus, their redefinition of the meaning of home.

Figure 5

Themes and Elements of the Voluntary Migration Phenomenon



Emotional Challenges in Uncertainty (Element: Emotions)

As participants recounted their experiences, this Emotional Challenges in Uncertainty (Emotions) was the first theme to emerge. It relates to the emotional uncertainty participants experienced as they stepped outside their comfort zones when they realized they were leaving

their homes to arrive in new and unknown environments. These experiences involve emotions associated with fear, anxiety, and sadness, as in Lisa's narrative when she said,

Uncertain of my future. You're right. Like, I was like, what is going to happen? I wasn't sure. Like, what is? What it was THERE for me? Because remember I left everything. I left even my education there.

In this passage, she expressed her feelings of uncertainty about her future and the unknown challenges of leaving her home, country, and everything she once knew. She emphasizes that she had "left everything," including her education, acknowledging the emotional burden of this decision. This awareness of her losses intensifies her hesitance, highlighting the physical act of relocating and the emotional toll of losing familiar structures, established connections, and support systems.

A second illustration of these themes comes with Erika's narrative, in which she grappled with a complex mix of sadness, uncertainty, and trust, as she took a leap into the unfamiliar. She openly confronted her fear of what awaited her on "the other side," as she engaged in an internal dialogue validating her decision regardless of the intense emotions she is experiencing. She said:

I told them. But it's like you don't know what is on the other side. So, I didn't know what to expect. I didn't know how it's gonna be. I just KNEW that I had to leave the country, . But, of course, with my family saying goodbye. My friends really was touching me because that's part of my life. So, I was sad in a way, but I said myself—I told myself—I said, "I know I'm coming back to visit everybody." I know that I'm coming back to you know, to keep in touch with everybody in a way and I'll be. ... I said, "I'm pretty sure I'll be returning." [Chuckle]. So, without even knowing what to expect out of Panama, I'm like, I guess I was trusting him. ... Without being nervous, without being anxious, or

without hesitat[ion], and, like, okay, what what's going to happen? ... I wasn't. I guess I was trusting him a lot. Yeah.

Her dedication to remaining connected to her roots supported her cognitive and emotional transition, as she embarked on a new journey. The balance she struck between hope and attachment demonstrates the thoughtful reflection in which she engaged, as she learned to embrace trust over her fears.

Another narrative connected to this theme is that of Manuel. His uncertainty did not stem from the unknown aspects of his transition; instead, it arose from a deep longing for the food and music of his home country and the uncertain prospect of experiencing these familiar comforts once more in a country that, after many years, can no longer receive him due to political unrest. I asked, “Why are you saying it makes you nostalgic?” Manuel answered,

Because, you know, sometimes you miss things; you miss flavors; you miss smells. That's pretty much it. [He had watery eyes.] I don't miss people [chuckle] because I have grown without them for so long, but it's the things that are so attached to me.

These feelings of loss highlight the emotional difficulty of separating from his roots and not knowing when he would encounter them again. These three narratives showed compelling examples of uncertainty and emotions related to the migration experience. Each story captures a unique facet of this journey, shedding light on the challenges faced by those who leave behind the familiar for the unknown.

Awareness as Catalysts for Growth (Element: Learning)

This theme became evident, as participants shared experiences that signaled a shift in perspective because of a major life event. For example, in Maria's narrative, she said,

I was like, there [church] was where I learned more of the things that you need to know, here in the States. Even directions like, you know, even giving directions and the way the postal service works. [Chuckle.] Like, because in Panama that it—We don't have that system. Just the postal system is completely different, and here it's so easy and so accessible and—

I asked, “It is interesting that it is so simple, but a moment ago you said to me, ‘Why does everything have to be so complicated?’” Maria responded,

Because at the beginning everything seems complicated, but then, when you learn, you are like, oh, it's easy. I believe—And it's really the same in Korea. When I was in Korea, I was like, “Oh, how do I gonna be around this place?” I will never gonna get around this place. This place is just too busy and too many streets and too much. But no! Then you get around and you are like, oh! It's like something open on you [chuckle], and you start... Now, I feel honestly—I feel like, I can go anywhere, and I will survive. That's how I feel.

After gaining the necessary skills to manage everyday interactions, Maria's reflections on her life in the United States highlight a significant shift in her self-confidence. She transitioned from a sense of uncertainty due to her feelings of cultural incompetence to a person capable of “surviving anywhere.” Her growing awareness and increasing ability to navigate complex systems symbolize her meaningful personal development. This awareness contributes to a crucial transition in her learning process, moving from a skill-based problem solver to a reflective experiential learner, evolving from feeling overwhelmed to feeling empowered, indicating a learning that fosters personal growth, self-efficacy, and adaptability to new contexts.

Another powerful example of awareness as a catalyst for growth comes from Manuel's narrative. He described an accident he suffered as the "breaking point" to change his current life path. He described this pivotal moment as a "before and after," where he became aware of his potential and decided that he could no longer waste his talents in unfulfilling work:

For me, the accident was important because it was like... it was my before and after. Like, the moment of the accident was for me to realize I can't keep doing this. Like, seriously, I am wasting my time here. I'm wasting my brain and my intelligence. I need to move forward. I had to do it for a while, but I think after a few years doing this I need to ... you know, upgrade. And on the way to the hospital, I was just thinking about it. I was like, What? Why am I doing this? I need to do something better. I am better than this. I need to fucking move forward. I can't keep doing this. I almost lo[st] an arm. You know what I'm saying? I need to get out of my comfort zone. ... Oh, I felt angry. I felt sad. I felt—Oh, I do know. Because I was like, this is not what—This is not my journey. My journey should be different. Like, I went to school, and I had that thing in my head all the time. I was like, I went to school for this reason; I need to use it. You cannot just half waste 4 years of my life and nothing, right?! And I'm like, Yeah! These jobs are the steppingstone, but I... even if I don't have documents, I can make it happen. I can make a better living. That moment WAS more than one word. It was a breaking point...it was a breaking point. It was like, that's it.

Manuel's life took an unexpected turn following his accident, which sparked a period of deep self-reflection. He began to identify the aspects of his life he had previously overlooked, leading to a significant realization of his aspirations and priorities. No longer satisfied with his temporary "steppingstone" job, he felt a pressing urgency to pursue opportunities that genuinely

aligned with his journalism background. This journey was not without its challenges; he recognized that embracing new paths would require him to step beyond his comfort zone and explore a new reality that resonated with his passions and ambitions.

One last example of awareness as a catalyst for growth comes from Erika's transcripts. She shared how she confronted her feelings of loneliness and isolation as a key turning point. Initially, she was excited by the novelty of her new experience, but quickly realized she had lost her family and all her support systems. This loneliness led her to reflect, asking herself hard questions: "*Do I really want this?*" and "*Do I want to commit to this relation[ship]?*" These questions and advice from her in-laws were pivotal for Erika, as they provided her with a sense of autonomy, resulting in actions to alleviate her loneliness, while setting her on a path toward personal growth and adaptation in her new life. She shared,

You know, excited that I was here... What I can tell you is that, like you said, everything was new. Looking at the house, looking at the streets and the people. ... And I say, like, the first year,... The FIRST YEAR trying to get used to... ... knowing around, a little bit. On the second year, I was—Now that I remember, I was getting lonely because the type of my Zodiac sign is about the family. And for me, family is everything. And if I don't have my family around or know about them or stuff like that, I start feeling lonely. Even I have [my husband], even he, you know, he was—He had too much attention and, you know, [had to] make sure that I was okay. That I was, you know, entertained, busy, or stuff like that. But I was feeling lonely in a way, so I told myself, I said, "[Erika], do you really want this?" Because I guess, I never been by myself without all my friends and all my family. So now that I'm older, that I know about how I am inside, I understand. So even, there was a few days that I was crying. A few days that I was debating, I was like, do I

really want this? Do I really wanna stay and commit to this this relation[ship]? I love him, you know, He was, like I said, he was very nice, My mom-in-law—I guess, you know, women know stuff—and my mom-in-law said, “What you need is to start working and get your mind busy because right now you’re not working. You’re just in the house and, you know, you are you are missing your family.” And I was like, maybe she’s right. Maybe I need to get this. Maybe, you know? So, on the second year, I applied for jobs and good thing that I saw one for bilingual, and I got it right away.

Erika’s learning illustrates how she gained a crucial self-understanding through introspection and embracing moments of vulnerability where she discovered profound insights about herself. This process helped her reconnect with her core values and inspired her to redefine her interests, allowing her to explore new opportunities and develop a new cultural identity as she searched to belong in an unknown space.

In this theme, participants shared their reflections throughout these narratives, as they considered fresh insights reshaping their self-perception. These moments show their strengths and weaknesses, empowering them to envision a more promising path forward. As they embarked on their journeys, they cultivated a newfound resilience, equipping them to confront challenges with greater confidence and new perspectives.

Building Resilience Through Community (Element: Belonging)

As participants shared their stories, a theme of community connection and resilience came to the forefront. This theme was evident in the journeys of nearly all participants. During the interviews, participants emphasized that access to new social networks and active engagement with their communities were vital for their transitions, enabling them to learn and

grasp the cultural nuances of their new surroundings. These connections fostered trust among individuals, as they navigated the challenges of adapting to different and new cultural contexts.

In the first example, Cecilia shared the support she received during a challenging period in the first few years of being in the United States. After leaving her job and feeling vulnerable due to language misunderstanding, she found emotional support and encouragement from her in-laws. She described their comforting presence as a protective barrier against the difficulties of the outside world, allowing her to feel secure and ready to move forward. After Cecilia mentioned that she started to cry as a result of an incident at work, I asked, “Why did you start to cry?” Cecilia responded,

Because I had just quit my job, and I had felt bad about the way she [boss] spoke to me and she scolded me. And I didn't like it. I started to cry. I told [my husband] I just quit. With my bad English, I don't know, how [my brothers-in-law] even understood me. And I was crying. But there were like—I saw them as four big ones [tall men]—all comforting me: “Don't worry. You're going to get another job. We will help you, or you don't have to work. Don't you want to work here? What do you want to do here?[their family-owned restaurant] Do you want to wait tables? You want to do...? Do you want to do something else? What do you like to do?” Then, I started working in the restaurant after that. But yes, I felt—And look. Look how when I talk about it [the experience] is when I realized it the most. Now that I'm telling you—I'm telling you right now, but that's exactly the word. Like, if you imagined me here, and the four of them around me like that! [She simulated a round structure of protection.] It was like a barrier against the world that was behind their backs. “Nothing bad will happen to you, you know?” All I know, like, the world that was behind them, nothing was going to touch me. Everything was going to be perfect.

They were going to help me all the time. It was like that feeling I got. That's when I said, when I really said, "My family is in Mexico, but here, I have another family." I have other people who are not necessarily, like, I don't know if the correct word would be help or protect or depend... I can depend. I can. I don't know if you understand me...

The collective encouragement from her in-laws enabled Cecilia to confront her fear of seeking new employment and provided her with a sense of belonging to a family different from her own. Despite her biological relatives being in Mexico, she discovered a new community with her in-laws. Their unwavering support, reassurance, and care made her feel accepted and valued in an unfamiliar environment. Knowing she had "another family" to depend on redefined her understanding of belonging, highlighting that community can be nurtured in new settings through supportive relationships.

Alba's connection with the Puerto Rican family next door illustrates the importance of networks to build resilience. Although Alba's husband played a crucial role in helping her adapt and feel supported, being introduced to other Spanish-speaking families encouraged her to have regular interactions, alleviating her loneliness and emotional challenges while cultivating a strong sense of community. In her narrative, she said,

My husband was a great support because he had many friends in his work. Most of his friends—That could be like, two or three families—Almost all of them spoke Spanish. Then, he would try to get together on a weekend like, every other weekend, one yes, one no, so that I could interact with them and not be alone. The months of living in the house we got, next door to us, right next door lived a Puerto Rican family, and we didn't know. And [like my husband] they were also soldiers, and from there, we became very close

friends, and to this day we are “compadres” because they became the children’s godparents.

The Puerto Rican family became a vital source of support and friendship for Alba, ultimately creating a deep bond, when they took on the roles of *compadres* (godparents) to her children. These social connections created a supportive network that alleviated her feelings of isolation and enhanced her sense of security and companionship. By engaging with other Spanish-speaking families and developing particularly strong ties with the Puerto Rican family, Alba found a nurturing environment, where she felt accepted and understood, exemplifying how a sense of belonging can be cultivated through shared language, culture, and deliberate efforts to establish social connections, in unfamiliar environments.

Equally relevant was Alexa’s story. As she settled in the United States, she received the advice of her mother-in-law to help her understand the lifestyle of her new country. Alexa shared that her mother-in-law played a crucial role in her transition to the United States by providing invaluable practical support. She encouraged Alexa to enroll in English and human resources classes to build a strong foundation for understanding her new conditions and gaining confidence. She said,

I was living in the house with my mother-in-law in that moment before get[ting] married. And then, I moved in the house that my husband was living [in], but [it] was in a little countryside. [My mother-in-law] was trying to build a little culture for me from the United States. So, she helped me a lot because she had that problem too... because she came to United States probably 25 years ago, and she didn’t have that help that she provided me in that moment. So, she said, “I just want to help you, just to balance how is the United States... because I didn’t have that help, so I want to help you.” So, that’s one

the reason she put me in classes for English and also a class for human resources, just to understand how is the working situation and just to learn more about that.

The participants' narratives highlighted the importance of community-based support, which significantly impacted their abilities to adapt and thrive. These examples illustrate that a sense of belonging is a fundamental element of personal integration, particularly fostered by the actions of those close to the participants. By actively aiding in language acquisition and navigating the new cultural landscape, these individuals play a crucial role in facilitating an understanding of U.S. culture. This supportive approach enhances their sense of acceptance and underscores how belonging contributes to a shared cultural understanding.

Personal Growth in a New Cultural Environment (Element: Identity)

A key theme that arose from the participants' narratives was their journey of personal growth as they adapted to a new cultural environment. Confronted with unfamiliar customs and norms, their existing beliefs and assumptions were tested. This process of reflection provided them with valuable insights into themselves and their experiences, illustrating the transformative power of migration. Through these challenges, they began to redefine their identities, uncovering new dimensions of who they are within the context of their evolving surroundings.

Flor shared the humiliations she faced as a newcomer. In her narrative, she discussed how her in-laws took advantage of her unfamiliarity with the local customs and their dismissive behavior when she first arrived. Instead of hindering her growth, these challenges motivated her to build a business with her husband, despite the doubts they encountered:

Being alone in a country that was not mine, fighting alone without asking anyone for help. Like, all I've been through, as I didn't have, when I started, I didn't have any money. Then, there was humiliation, on the part of people who did have [some money]. And

seeing me as a person who emigrated, not having anything. And [Flor,] you need me, and [Flor,] you have to put up with me because [Flor,] you need me. But now in the future, I achieved, like, to build, step by step, with my partner, the business we have now. We were able to get our home, even though people who had been coming here, said that we were never going to have anything because we started from scratch.

Flor's determination in the face of adversity cultivates significant personal growth, enabling her to evolve from a vulnerable outsider into a capable and accomplished individual. Flor's journey is instrumental in shaping her identity, firmly rooted in her hard-earned achievements. She constructed a life that challenges the initial judgments and limitations placed upon her by others. Additionally, Flor's experiences revealed new strengths and abilities within her, guiding her to develop an identity characterized by resilience, independence, and success from facing challenges and being able to overcome them.

Lisa showed a shift in her understanding of the importance of reassessing her preconceived notions in relation to the cultural norms of her home country. Initially, Lisa associated her role as a cashier with a lack of education, reflecting the societal attitudes prevalent in her culture; however, through reflection, she reinterpreted her experience, recognizing this as an opportunity for learning rather than a setback. This shift marked significant growth, as she adjusted her self-worth in a new cultural environment.

In my country a cashier is a person who had no education, right? So, why I [did I have] to be a cashier? I changed my perspective of what I was doing. So, I was like, you know what? This is a school.

As Lisa worked as a cashier, she reflected on her former career as a journalist. Rather than viewing this transition as a loss of status, she reframed her circumstances. This shift in

perspective allowed her to uncover new aspects of herself and prompted a reassessment of her values and beliefs about work. Lisa recognized that she could find meaning in this position, transforming past biases and societal judgments from her home country into sources of empowerment for her personal development. This newfound understanding enriched her identity and cultivated a more adaptable and growth-oriented mindset.

Maria's journey exemplifies personal growth, as she navigated U.S. culture. In her interview, she reflected on the challenges of adapting to life in this country, describing it as a place that demands intense focus, persistence, and resilience. Initially, she questioned the United States as the "land of opportunity," yet through her experiences, she gained insight into the complexities and barriers, including language differences and the need to build connections to get ahead. These factors have prompted her to redefine the concepts of success and opportunity. Her strong emphasis on hard work, coupled with the importance she places on supportive relationships, highlights a shift in her identity because she came to see herself as an individual striving to overcome obstacles and as a member of a community of migrants committed to "working 1,000% harder" to move forward:

You need to be very competitive in order to get what you want or to be the best one, in order to get what you want. And I don't know if it's everyone saying that it's, like, the 'land of opportunity.' It might be the land of opportunity but not always turn out that way. Not always. Because many people come full of dreams, and it's hard. Some of them make [it]. Some of them, they don't... but you just need to be like, focus[ed], I guess, in what you want and work hard in what you want and find your ways and to be honest, find good connections. Connections [are] what makes most things possible.

I asked her, "What do you mean with connections?" Maria responded,

Connections: knowing the right people. So, yeah, USA can be like—I remember I used to work in a restaurant, when I was like in [city name]. I worked there for a few months, and I could see those Mexicans that were illegal, they worked so hard, so hard that I was like, I don't know. [Sigh.] I don't know if it's worth it or not to be honest. But they did it, and I don't know. They worked hard. You just have to put in your head that you have to work like, not 100%, like 1,000% harder. And break all the barriers that you might find, like, [the] language barrier and many others barriers. But yeah... if you want, I mean you can make it, but you need to work really hard, like I say.

I followed up, “So from your experience. What elements were important during your transition?”

Maria responded,

Well, it was important to have a positive mind. That that was very important. It was important to have people around you that that made you feel like home. Like, I had my sister, you know? And that was a good support. And I think just having a good, a positive attitude because you will need it. What other elements you say... you need to be strong and I just don't—Like, be persistent, very persistent in what you want. And even if many, many ones at first say no, you need to keep going and find your way.

By navigating the complexities of their new country, migrants can cultivate richer and multifaceted cultural identities. This transformative journey encourages the integration of elements from their old cultures with their new surroundings, prompting individuals to question their assumptions while embracing diverse influences. This dynamic interplay between the old and new cultures highlights shifts in how identities are developed, illustrating how migrants can undergo positive shifts in their self-perception while fostering personal growth as they effectively balance the demands of their new cultures.

Ongoing Changes and Adaptation (Element: Transitions)

A prominent theme emerging from the narratives was the significant changes and adaptations that participants experienced. Their stories vividly illustrated their journeys, highlighting the necessity of continually adjusting to the diverse and often challenging social, cultural, and economic landscapes of the United States. These ongoing shifts signaled a constant state of transition as a vital element under the overarching theme.

The first example comes from Estela. She intensely recounted her journey of navigating the cultural differences in family dynamics and structures that she encountered in the United States. At first, she found the variations in how families interact bewildering, but over time, she embraced these differences. She acknowledged that she “*can’t change things*,” adding that she must “*pretend [she is] crazy*” to cope with her experiences. This playful acceptance underscores her ongoing struggle to reconcile her previous expectations of family life with the reality she faces in her new environment. Her story highlights the complex adaptation and acceptance she must undertake to bridge cultural divides, particularly when it comes to deeply held values such as family unity, which can vary significantly across cultures.

The family union: I had a family like that [unattached to other family members], not all Americans are that way. I have other friends, and their in-laws and parents are different... but as I said, I think I’m getting over it. It has already been—My son, the oldest, is 13 years old. I mean, I said, it is what it is, I have to pretend I’m crazy. I can’t do—One cannot change things.

Estela’s experience, which points to her transition from resistance to acceptance as a progression from grappling with cultural differences in family dynamics to discovering effective coping strategies, showcases a significant shift in her perspective. She understood that adaptation

requires embracing aspects of the new culture that might not align with her previous notions of family values. This realization emphasizes that transitions not only involve physical relocation but a reconfiguration of one's mindset to accommodate the new realities.

Another example comes from Alba's narrative. She shared that her early life was marked by frequent movements posing significant challenges from her migration experience. In her story, Alba said that her husband's military background was the reason for having to constantly move. Although initially, these transitions were difficult for her, as she found it hard to establish a sense of stability, over time, she developed the ability to adapt, which allowed her to no longer be "afraid of change":

I think it has been a little easy, but also, it has been part of what life here is because for me it's like I arrived and moved from many places with little time apart. Like, I had, the first years were spent moving from state to state, and there comes a point when one is no longer afraid of change.

This quote suggests that transitions can serve as catalysts for shifts in perspective. This development in Alba's mindset shows her journey from uncertainty to a newfound comfort in facing the unknown. It emphasizes that while transitions may initially be frightening, they also present valuable opportunities for self-discovery. Alba's acceptance of change and her growing confidence in navigating new situations demonstrate that transitions can enhance one's adaptability, allowing individuals to cultivate a sense of stability amid uncertainty.

Maria's journey of adapting to a new environment, unfamiliar infrastructure, and intricate navigation systems serves as a testament to the resilience of migrants during times of transition. In her narrative, she recounted the challenges of learning to drive without the help of a GPS in a region characterized by convoluted highways and complex interchanges. This process proved to

be disorienting and emphasized Maria's experience as a time of adjustment. She reflected on the significant adjustments she had to make in her daily routines, which were vastly different from those she was accustomed to in her home country, highlighting the broader challenges many face when starting in an unfamiliar land.

I remember once [in a town], just driving the streets. I remember that at that time, there was no GPS or anything, and I remember that [chuckle] they told me two to the right, two to—I don't know what, and here... and I did what I was told and nothing. And I said, my God, but why does everything have to be so complicated? What did I do? Doing nothing more than driving, and it was nighttime, and I was alone, and it was a dark street. A place that already looked dangerous, and I was about to explode, and I said, my God, but what am I doing wrong? Until, I don't know, after so much back and forth, I kind of figured out what it was, but it took me a while. And just driving, just the streets, getting used to the highways because in Panama there was no highway in that, at that time, and just the highways for me were like, WOW, I don't know if you remember.

This scenario indicates a fundamental shift in Maria's mindset, as she moved from frustration with the unknown to embracing her inner strength, demonstrating a readiness to welcome new experiences. Her challenges highlight a deepening awareness of the complexities and demands of her new life, underscoring the importance of maintaining an open mind during this adjustment period. This realization portrays transitions as catalysts for self-discovery and enhanced her understanding of her own capacity for perseverance.

Although adaptation and transition are interrelated, they represent distinct aspects of the experiences individuals undergo when responding to new environments. Transition, as described by Bridges (1980), is characterized by a movement that begins with an ending, progressing

through a phase of confusion and distress, eventually leading to a new beginning. This perspective emphasizes the often tumultuous nature of change that individuals experience during cultural transitions. It effectively captures the emotional disruptions that accompany significant life changes, portraying how people engage with their new realities, while gradually reconciling differing values and beliefs, uncovering new beginnings in the process. The narratives of the participants clearly highlighted their experiences of confronting and overcoming immediate challenges. They shared their efforts to establish systems and manage daily tasks within a new cultural landscape. Together, adaptation and transition offer valuable insights into the complex experiences that define the journey of acculturation while navigating life's changes. This dynamic process demands resilience and a willingness to embrace change, as demonstrated by the participants, who forged their paths in a foreign land.

Navigating Cultural Differences, Parenting, Work, and Support (Element: Adaptation)

Several participants articulated a variety of challenges they faced while adapting to their new environments. These included the struggle to preserve their cultural identity, an evolving understanding of motherhood, and the difficulties in finding support for managing everyday tasks. These experiences captured the complex dynamics participants encountered, as they learned the intricacies of their new cultural and social landscapes.

In the context of acculturation literature, *adaptation* refers to the long-term changes that individuals or groups make in response to their environmental demands. This process is deep, and often gradual, resulting in a relatively stable change that allows individuals to function effectively within their new cultural settings (Berry, 1997). In my observations of the participants' narratives in this study, I noted that they made deliberate efforts to adapt to their new cultural norms while also striving to maintain their cultural identities. They shared their

experiences throughout this process to preserve their authentic selves and reconcile differing values and beliefs.

The first example comes from Manuel's journey. He contemplated his commitment to honoring and preserving his Venezuelan heritage, while navigating his relationship and envisions his future family. With a heartfelt desire to keep his culture alive, he shared his thoughtful idea of blending traditional practices with those of his fiancée, aiming to forge a unique custom that honors both of their backgrounds. He described an innovative practice they engaged in as "sacred," infusing it with a sense of reverence and his dreams of passing it down to his future children, hoping for this new tradition to help future generations remain connected to their roots and cultural identity. Manuel said,

I think roots are important. And I mean, you have trees. Without them, you're not gonna feed them or anything. You cannot deny where you're from. You cannot deny all of those things, and they build you. Even if I have been assimilated and have all these years, and I don't have a lot of connection to my past life back home. I think that helped build me. Like, all those things make what I am right now. You know!? All that arepa [name of a Venezuelan's dish; chuckle] and the coño de la madre [Venezuelan expression] el Chavez, and the flag and this and that, somehow that's in my DNA. And I cannot deny that. And it's funny, [because] the older you get, the more you reminisce about that. You remember more, oh, when I was a kid, I used to do this. When I was a kid, I used to like that stuff. Oh, I used to see this thing. So, I do have a lot of new memories about my childhood and my time in Venezuela that I didn't have 30, 20 years ago. I wasn't thinking about that. I wasn't thinking or caring about that. Now I do, because maybe it's a place where I cannot go anymore. Maybe because I don't know. There's so many things that are not there

anymore. My family is not there anymore. The country it was is not there anymore. It's just nostalgic, you know? But I do think it's important. If I have like for example, [name], my fiancée. She had learned how to love arepas and Venezuelan food and even music. And it's not that we're playing music all the time. Or eating arepas every day. I eat arepas every 4 months or something. But when we do, it's sacred. It's beautiful. It's something that we cherish, you know, and it's nice. Even with her things, like, she's from South Carolina. We do the same things with things that she grew up with, like, the things that are more in heritage, her roots. [His eyes got watery.] Something in my eye. [Laugh.] No, but even with her. So, I think we try to do the same. Both sides. She is from South Carolina. ... We tried to get food that is local from there every now and then. Or do things that she used to do when she was a child. We know it varies from there. So, it's kind of important [to] make sure we share those things, you know? It's my world; it's your world. But also thinking about [the] future, and, like, we want to bring [a] baby, but we want [the] baby to understand that papa comes from this place, mama comes from this place, you know? And how to integrate all those things together.

This text exemplifies adaptation by showcasing Manuel's journey of reconciling his cultural roots with his life in the United States. His sense of nostalgia reveals a deep understanding of how his cultural background influences his identity, as he establishes a life with his fiancée. Manuel's commitment to blending their traditions demonstrates that adaptation involves adjusting to a new environment and thoughtfully preserving and integrating one's heritage. This thoughtful approach allows both cultural identities to coexist.

Flor articulated her astonishment at the widespread U.S. custom of sending infants to daycare, a practice that felt completely foreign to her understanding of motherhood. At first, she

experienced a wave of discomfort, as she wrestled with this lifestyle choice, believing it undermined the nurturing bond between mother and child. As she became acclimated to life in the United States, Flor recognized the significant challenges many mothers face. She realized that for numerous families, the necessity of work often takes precedence, leaving them without the option to stay home and care for their children. This understanding helped her process her feelings and gain a new perspective on the complexities of motherhood in a different cultural context:

The Americans, in the way they raise their children, in which—Okay, they have a child. One month, 2 months they leave the kid in a school, while I was never raised in that way. My mom stayed with us. She never worked. And I think that was one of the shocks. I thought, wow, but he's still little. Why are they going to leave him alone? Do you understand me? I did not see that when I grew up. You know what I mean? When I was growing up, my mom was there with us, and my dad worked, so. Now I say, well, you have to do what you have to do. The mom, 1 month, has to go to work. She leaves the child at the daycare. She finds a place with someone who can take care of him, and it is fine. In other words, I came to change that way of thinking. Over time, when I continued to live in the United States. It's like two big shocks because sometimes I feel sorry for children who are mistreated by people you don't know and as a mother you feel bad because you say, No, it's not because I wanted to leave him, it's because I had to do it. Everything here [in the United States] is I have to do it. It's not because I wanted to do it. Here, in the United States, it is like that. Whatever you do, you have to do it. It's not because you wanted to.

By aligning her deeply held beliefs with the stark realities of her new environment, Flor demonstrates the cognitive and emotional shifts she experienced as she navigated the complexities of unfamiliar cultural norms. Her journey to understanding parenting in the United States highlights a transformation and illustrates her gradual embrace of new values that were profoundly influenced by her migration experience. This evolution not only reflects her resilience but also her willingness to adapt and grow in the face of change.

Another example that shows the challenges faced by migrants arriving in the United States is Lisa's story. As she shared her experiences, she emphasized her strong connection to her home, missing her family, and the loneliness she felt in this foreign country. Lisa discussed how language is a barrier and the steps she took to adapt and thrive. With her husband frequently away, she learned to cultivate her independence and enlisted her sister's help to learn how to drive and obtain her driver's license. She stated,

It was HUGE... [Not being able to drive] It was a huge problem for me because I'm very attached to my family. I'm a family person. My family is like the number one thing in my life. My mom. My siblings, my cousins. My cousins are like my siblings, and it wasn't because I need to move out of my country to looking for a better life. It wasn't that. The... The emotions like the mix of emotions was very, very hard on me. Plus, [my husband] was, gone most of the time. So, I was in a country, where I didn't speak the language. I didn't drive, so I had to bring my sister to help me to, like, get my driver's license because she knew how to drive, and I didn't. The language was one of the barriers that I was facing. Then, I start going to church, and then in church, they have these classes that you like—Trying to [learn] English, but it basically wasn't classes, it was more like interactions and then you can start [to] try to talk because you got force[d] to talk and

they're like, "Never be ashamed[d] of when you try to speak English." Especially somebody at my age already, you know, when you're 21, you start from zero and start another language. It was very hard [for] me, but I did [it].

This narrative offers insight into the intricate adjustments that characterize migrant life, illustrating how cultural differences intertwine with personal and social adaptation. Despite beginning "from zero" at the age of 21, Lisa demonstrated a gradual process of growth, highlighting both emotional and practical adjustments that helped her build confidence in navigating her new life. Through determination and perseverance, she learned to tackle the complexities of her new circumstances while embracing the challenges and opportunities that came her way.

A final example illustrating the contrasting dynamics of the U.S. cultural environment in the context of migration comes from Erika's interview. During our discussion, she shared her observations on the differing values between her Latino culture and U.S. culture. She noted the Latino community embodies a strong sense of support and communal warmth, characterized by acts of generosity and neighborly care. In contrast, she described U.S. culture as individualistic, referring to it as "like ice and selfish," which suggests an unwelcoming atmosphere. She said, "Our culture, it's amazing. Our Latino culture, it's wonderful. And then, for me to know the American culture, it's like a piece of ice to me." I asked, "What do you mean?" Erika replied,

Well, little by little, I've been learning that we care, we CARE for our neighbors, the Latino culture. We care for our neighbors, you know? We share stuff, like, you know, cucumbers. Like, neighbor, take my cucumber. I don't remember another one, but when I did realize knowing, little by little, Americans, they are so selfish. And they will let you know, sometimes, and they will show it. Nothing with racism at all, but it's the way they

are. So, that's what kind of shocked me, to be honest, the way of that, the American culture. AT WORK... going back to where I'm from. A job, I mean at work, we enjoy work. It's your job, you know? You do everything for that [job] because if not you're gonna get fired, and you will not have another job. So, there is a lot of fellowship versus here. In this case, it depends on the organization. It depends on the department, and it depends on the boss and everything. I noticed that every—A few coworkers showed me more selfishness—is that how you say that?—with some things at work.

Facing Discrimination, Hatred, and Racism (Element: Rejection):

Discrimination and racism can evoke intense feelings of exclusion and rejection among migrants arriving in the United States. This profound sense of alienation takes an emotional toll and significantly affects mental health. Many participants recounted their personal experiences of encountering these harsh realities, describing the moments when they realized that certain members of the host community rejected their presence. These experiences highlight the struggles migrants face as they seek acceptance and belonging in a new environment. Lisa, Maria, and Erika shared their experiences related to this theme.

Lisa shared an experience of discrimination and exclusion that she faced upon moving to Louisiana. As she entered her new neighborhood, she observed that every house displayed a Confederate flag. Unfamiliar with its meaning, Lisa found herself puzzled by this symbol, which she had never encountered before. After her husband explained its significance, she became increasingly aware that her neighbors, who were predominantly White, consistently ignored her in their interactions. She explained how, due to an unforeseen event, she had the opportunity to interact with her neighbors and inquire about their treatment. I prompted Lisa with an excerpt of her narrative and asked,

Lisa, you talked about the incident with the CPR and how the word got out, that you saved somebody else's mom in a community you believe to be racist. How does that change your interactions and perspectives as a migrant? Before you were being ignored. Did it change? And if so, how? I asked.

Lisa responded,

I went to my house. And then she's like, "Thank you, the paramedics say you were—She wouldn't have survived if you didn't do the CPR. I want you to know that I'm across the street if you need anything. Please, let me know." And I [was] just looking at her, and I'm like, "Yeah, every time you open your garage, it's a HUGE. Like the WHOLE, inside of your garage, it's a Confederate flag," and I'm like, I'm not going to your house. One day, she was like, "Hey, we're having a wine party," and I'm like, "GREAT." "I will be so glad for you to come, and I can introduce you to all the ladies from the community," and I'm like, "GREAT. Yes, I'm up for it." And then I told my husband, I'm like, "Guess what? They invited me to a wine party. These WHITE ladies." The thing is my community was 50 and over, and we were in our 20s to 30s [chuckles]. So, I'm like, yeah, I got to go with all these WHITE OLD SCHOOL LADIES. That's why they were like that because they were old school ladies, so I went there. And then, of course, I went, and I COOKED my guts out. I cooked all the Panamanian food that I could because I was like, I'm not going to bring cookies and tea. That's NOT going to happen. I'm going to bring MY FOOD. I got to bring the stuff that WE EAT as a Panamanian. And I [will] bring it. Guess what food went first: MINE. So, they like, "You have to get me the recipe." And then, they started inviting me to different stuff that they were doing. They LOVE it. They're like, "LOVE your food! LOVE your culture!" They asked me about my country. I

always tell them like, we don't need to migrate. I'm here because of my husband. Like, we have a very beautiful country. We have everything that you guys have here and MORE. We had it in my country. Like, my country is one of the countries that have more Americans, is very Americanized. That's how, little by little, I was part of them, without— And then, one day, I asked one of them, "Why you guys never wave to us?" She was like, "Because we didn't know YOU." And I'm like, "But you didn't know a lot of people, and it is very nice if you actually meet people, and then, then you make a judgement" because I was very uncomfortable for a long time because I waved to all of you, and then none of you say hi to me until this episode. And she was like, "I—We are so sorry. We misjudged." I'm like, "YES! And then, like me [there are] a lot of people that you can meet. Great people from other countries or other colors and you[re] missing. You missing all that." And then, until this day, we're VERY good friends. This lady right now, she's, like, almost 70 years old. We're super good friends. She is on Facebook and then she posts very funny stuff, and then, I think I'm the only Brown person in her Facebook.

Lisa's experience illustrates the significant biases and racial assumptions that shaped her social interactions, causing her to feel unwelcome in her own community; however, after the incident in which a neighbor's mother was saved, the community underwent a transformation. This shift allowed Lisa to share her culture and develop meaningful relationships, gradually challenging and dismantling the racial barriers that had initially left her feeling isolated. This change was evident in her ongoing interaction with community members who had initially rejected her but later embraced her as part of their group. Her journey highlights the profound impact of rejection and emphasizes how deeply ingrained beliefs can shape an individual's sense of belonging, cultural identity, and community, particularly in the context of migration.

Another instance that shows the theme of discrimination and hatred comes from Maria. During our interview, she recounted an incident in which a man verbally attacked her, mistakenly assuming she was undocumented based on her appearance and limited English proficiency. His threat to “call immigration” and his reference to “your people” reveal the deep-seated biases and prejudices that marginalized Maria and led her to being treated as inferior. This experience left her feeling powerless and frustrated as she struggled to articulate her anger due to the language barrier:

We were doing laundry. It was on a weekend, and it was pouring rain like SUPER HEAVY. And my sister told me, “Maria, please go and take the car and get the clothes. It should be done.” And it was, like, raining so hard when I went to the area where the laundry room was. I didn’t see any parking spots there, and I was like, oh, my God, [I then saw] just one, and it wasn’t a visitor parking. And I was like, well, it was the only one under roof, I’m just gonna run with my basket, take all the clothes from the dryer and just—It will take me, like, less than 5 minutes. When I was coming, the owner of the parking lot [came back], and he parked his car and came out and started yelling at me. My English was so bad at that time, but I underst[ood] everything he said, and I wanted to tell him so many things that I couldn’t. He is like, “What are you doing in my parking spot?” I was like, “I’m sorry. I’m getting wet, and it was raining. It’s just for 2 minutes. Just 2 minutes.” [Chuckle and smile.] You know, and he’s like, “That’s the problem with YOU with YOUR PEOPLE. You want me to call immigration?” Oh, my goodness. He assumed that just because I was an immigrant, I was illegal or something. I was so mad... I wanted to tell him where to go, and I wanted to tell him many bad things at that moment, and I wanted to tell him, “Call them. I don’t have any—I don’t have anything to

be afraid of.” Like, he assumed immediately because I am not an American, and he knew that my English was broken, that I was illegal IMMEDIATELY. And I remember I was ALL WET. The clothes got wet because I couldn’t—I was like, he [caught] me coming out with the basket and everything, and I just went and told my sister. And I was like, “THAT IDIOT! I HATE HIM!” I remember I was CRYING, and I was like—But I was so angry that I couldn’t tell him everything I wish[ed] I could tell him in that moment, just because I didn’t know how to.

The moment emphasizes the emotional toll that discrimination inflicts on migrants and emphasizes the unfair assumptions they often encounter in daily interactions. Faced with harsh judgments and unfounded assumptions regarding her legal status, Maria’s experience encapsulates the very essence of exclusion and prejudice. Moreover, her inability to defend herself due to language barriers intensified her frustration and sense of powerlessness, serving as a poignant reminder of the challenges migrants face in communities where they settle.

During a visit to West Virginia, Erika encountered an unsettling atmosphere in a small-town restaurant. For the first time in 24 years, she shared how she felt acutely aware of the hostile glares from another patron. The stare weighed heavily with unspoken judgment, leading her to interpret their scrutiny as overt racial hostility, which cast a shadow over her experience. This unexpected experience left her feeling unwelcome and profoundly uneasy. She shared she felt judged, as if she were an outsider and quickly shifted her attentions to having to leave the place “before something happened.” Erika connected this disconcerting incident to the current divisive political climate in the United States, which she believed had fostered a sense of alienation and intensified her discomfort in an unfamiliar environment. She shared,

I went to West Virginia, at the northern part of Pennsylvania, when the former president won, during those years he has been in power. I am referring to [the former president's name]. I got to visit West Virginia or Virginia. No, sorry, West Virginia and Pennsylvania. On both occasions, I was with my husband. The first experience I had was when I entered a small restaurant, very small, one of those very small ones. This was in West Virginia. There were people in front of me. I mean, you know, like, when you sit and you see each other, and I, for the first time, felt the hatred in a look. I felt—I even felt the energy of that person. In other words, I stayed like—I said wow, they're not kidding when they say that certain states are racist. I've never experienced it because I've always been here in the eastern part of the country, which has a lot of black people and a lot of, you know, Latino people now. But I had never experienced it. And I tell my husband, and I said "Hey, it's true. For the first time, I felt that I was being JUDG[ED], that I was being seen in a different way." But it was like, it's like a radar. That's how they looked at you. That's how they looked at you. And he and I went out. We ate, but we left very quickly because even I felt a little bit not with fear, but I felt a little bit like, before something happens, we better leave.

These examples illustrate the diverse experiences of migrants who have chosen to establish new lives in the United States. Each encounter sheds light on regional attitudes and sociopolitical contexts that significantly shape migrants' feelings of belonging or alienation. This narrative underscores the often-unspoken rejections they face, reflecting on their sense of safety and belongingness. It offers important insights into the subtle yet powerful forms of exclusion that voluntary migrants may encounter across various cultural settings. Ultimately, their

perceptions of society are profoundly influenced by the burden of such prejudice, often leaving enduring impacts on their self-worth and sense of belonging.

Experiencing Homesickness and Loss of Family Connections (Element: Reflection):

The central theme in these narratives is homesickness and the complex nature of losing family connections. Many participants conveyed a deep sense of sadness stemming from their distance from loved ones, while living in a new country. Through their reflections, they gained a heightened awareness of the importance and significance of home and family in their lives. Some expressed a strong desire to spend more time with relatives during visits to their home country, while others reminisced about the traditions they used to share. This introspection allowed them to clarify their aspirations and objectives in a different environment, effectively intertwining their past, present, and future.

During her interview, Flor shared her evolving feelings toward her family and their importance since relocating from Panama. Initially, she embraced her independence and felt that being away from home allowed her to show her family that she was able to accomplish her goals. As time passed, however, her experience deepened her desire to spend time with her family and reinforced her awareness of the warmth and connection she felt at home and had left behind:

The transformation it gave me was that I am more...attached to my family back in Panama. When I came here, I didn't feel that attachment, but now that I'm here, I am more sensitive to that part. I like to spend time with them more, I WANT to spend more time with them. I want to spend more time with them because I am not with them here. It's something you miss—One feels the distance and that familiar warmth that I did not [feel] at the time I came. I [though]—I don't need my family. I don't need that family warmth, but as time goes by, being here for me, my family is the most important thing now.

Flor's reflections suggest that distance often heightens feelings of homesickness and deepens one's appreciation for familial ties and the sense of belonging they offer. Through introspection, she revealed how her relationship with her family has evolved following her migration. This insight shifted her priorities, underscoring the significance of familial bonds and started her redefinition of the meaning of home. Ultimately, Flor's experience illustrates how migration prompts individuals to reassess their values and develop their identities, highlighting its transformative effect on personal growth.

Another narrative that presents homesickness and the loss of family connections comes from Lisa's narrative. In her journey, she coped with her separation from her close-knit family, which she considered the most vital aspect of her life. She shared the intensity of her feelings after relocating to the United States, while grappling with challenges related to language barriers and her husband's absence. She shared,

It was a huge problem for me because I'm very attached to my family. I'm a family person. My family is like the number one thing in my life. My mom, my siblings, my cousins. My cousins are like my siblings, and it wasn't because I need to move out of my country to looking for a better life. It wasn't that. The mix of emotions was very, very hard on me. Plus, [my husband] was gone most of the time and I was in a country where I didn't speak the language.

Lisa's reflections illustrate the emotional toll that migration can take on individuals, shining a light on the numerous challenges that come with adapting to unfamiliar surroundings. Her insights provide a profound understanding of the struggles associated with adjusting to a new environment, particularly the feelings of loneliness and disconnection that often accompany a lack of support. Through this deeply personal reflective process, Lisa learned to confront her

feelings of isolation and longing for familiarity. This journey enhanced her self-awareness and equipped her with the skills needed to navigate her new life with resilience and a sense of purpose.

In the context of homesickness and the loss of family connections, I shared Estela's story. She reflected on her journey as a new mother living away from her family and the challenges she encountered along the way. In her narrative, she discussed the struggles she faced during her early days, grappling with feelings of vulnerability and the uncertainties of caring for her first child. These represent one of the many struggles migrants face as part of their transitions:

I had my first baby and never went back to work. That was—I think those moments were the most difficult of all because when I had my first baby, my family was not there. My family was not there. I had a baby, and you don't know anything. When you have a child, you don't know anything.

This brief passage captures Estela's reflections on the daunting challenges of motherhood, particularly in the absence of her family's support. It underscores her sense of vulnerability and overwhelming uncertainty she feels as a migrant navigating a new and unfamiliar environment. Her narrative presents some of the obstacles Estela encounters, portraying her struggles and resilience as she entered this new chapter of her life.

Another aspect of this theme comes from Maria's evocative reflection on her country. During our conversation, she shared her longing for home during significant moments, such as the holiday season. The warmth of her Panamanian traditions and the joyful celebrations she once shared with friends created an evident sense of longing for her traditions:

As an immigrant, you have to have clear, of course that things are not going to be so easy. From making friendships, one will experience a lot of loneliness. I remember when I was

here too. One, suffered from what they call “homesickness.” I also suffered from that at the beginning, because I said “oh, I miss my Pana—” And still sometimes, I wake up, and I wake up patriotic and I want my Panama [visibly emotional, teary eyes], and one—I think that’s something you deal with all your life. And it happens to me at times. At least when Christmas comes...

Maria’s reflections illustrate her coping mechanisms as she navigates the intense longing for her homeland, Panama. Her insights emphasize the enduring and profound emotional impact of migration, emphasizing how her cultural identity, deeply rooted in her cherished traditions, shaped her sense of self. The way Maria expressed her homesickness and connection to her culture reveals a profound emotional response characteristic of the migrant experience.

The Connecting Thread

The concept of “home” plays a crucial role in connecting personal narratives and is essential for understanding the complexities of migration. For voluntary migrants, home is multifaceted, encompassing physical, emotional, and symbolic dimensions that are often linked to the country of origin, evoking feelings of nostalgia and cultural continuity (Brun & Fábos, 2015; Parutis, 2006). As Blunt and Dowling (2006) described, the understanding of home for both forced and voluntary migrants includes not only a physical location, but also a network of social contexts, and familial ties that provide comfort and a strong sense of identity, and belonging. This concept can be regarded as a “temporal signifier,” representing an idealized point of origin and place of return, embodying a longing for the past, emphasizing a desire to reconnect with meaningful moments and experiences that were lived and can no longer be relived (Blunt & Dowling, 2006). The authors further explain that the meaning associated with the material, imaginative, embodied, and affective dimensions of home are essential to the

individual migration experience. Therefore, rather than seeing “diasporic homemaking” as a replication of tradition and culture, it is important to understand that the meaning-making associated with home is a dynamic and transformative process in which individuals develop their cultural identities, as they seek to belong when they reinterpret cultural traditions.

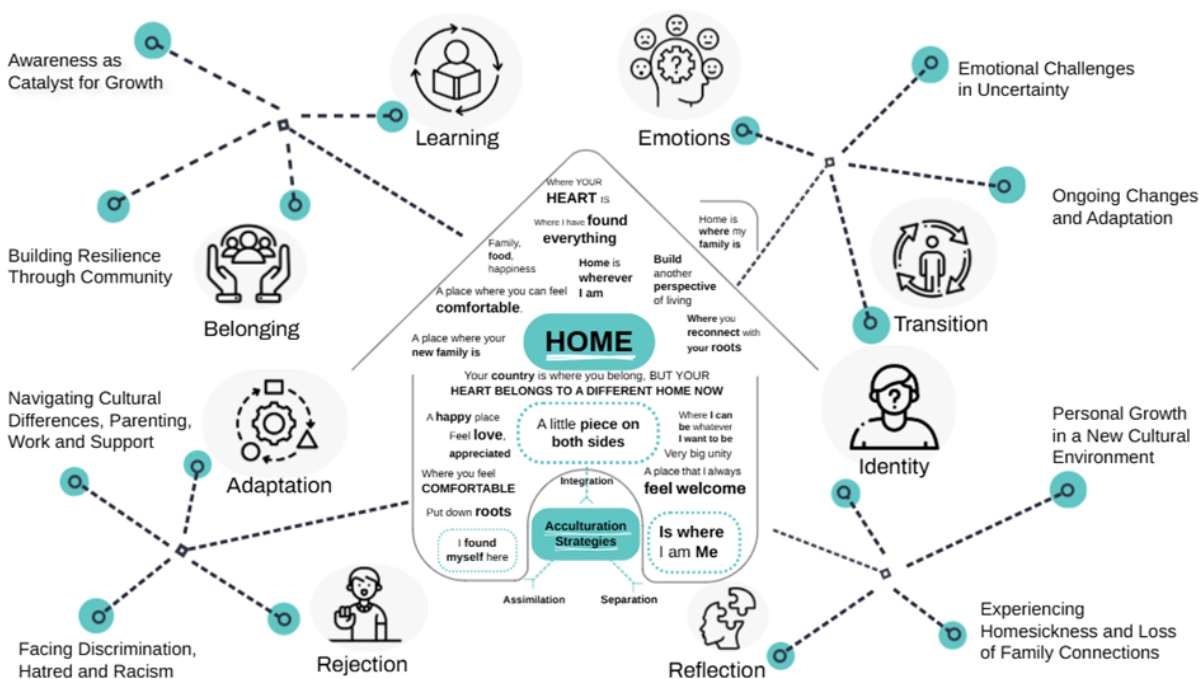
In this study, home emerged as a thread connecting the participants’ narratives. Initially, it was defined as not merely a physical location but as a blend of emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions, in which voluntary migrants’ definitions transcended boundaries. It included the elements of emotion, learning, belonging, transitions, adaptation, rejection, reflection, and identity, with home standing as the thread that ties the diverse migration experiences. Later, their redefinition of home illustrated a dynamic learning process influenced by sociocultural interactions with both the country of origin and the host country. For five participants, they retained a strong emotional connection to their place of origin, viewing it as the primary definition of home. This connection often manifested through feelings of homesickness, a longing for familiar cultural practices, and a desire to maintain familial bonds. Such emotions emphasize the migrants’ attachment to their roots and reflect an acculturation strategy of separation where the original cultural identity is preserved while interactions with the host culture remain minimal.

As migrants navigated their new environments, their concept of home evolved. For three participants, assimilation became the prevailing strategy, where they increasingly identified with and adopted the cultural norms of the host society, gradually redefining home to align with their new surroundings than it did with their country of origin. This shift involved significant emotional and cognitive adjustments as migrants they learned to adapt new cultural elements to their identity. For one participant, however, adopting integration as a strategy blending their

original cultural identities with the elements of the host culture resulted in a dual concept of home that encompassed both the origin and the host country, to form a complex sense of belonging that incorporates aspects of both cultural identities. This integrated definition of home facilitated a more holistic adaptation to the new environment, enabling this participant to engage fully with the host society while retaining a strong connection to cultural roots. These redefinitions of home provided valuable insights into how acculturation strategies are not merely responses to the host society but are active constructions of meaning that help migrants negotiate their place within a new cultural landscape. By redefining home, they engaged. This study fills a critical gap in acculturation theory by illustrating how the redefinition of home informs the adoption of specific acculturation strategies. The nuanced interconnections can be seen in Figure 6.

Figure 6

Home: The Connecting Thread of the Lived Experiences of Voluntary Migrants



Chapter Summary

This chapter presents findings from an analysis of participants' lived experiences, highlighting that emotional challenges and uncertainties are fundamental aspects of the migration journey. These challenges encourage critical reflection and lead to transformations in identity, as participants exhibit significant personal growth while grappling with feelings of isolation and embracing new opportunities. Their emotional experiences are central to the learning process, transcending mere cognitive tasks to actively facilitate reflection and engagement. This emotional investment is vital, as individuals confront and process profound feelings of loss and belonging, arising from their migration experiences.

The analysis also highlights the importance of social engagement and community connections as key factors in facilitating long-term adaptation. These connections helped participants overcome initial struggles and develop a sense of belonging, providing them with the support needed to navigate the complexities of acculturation. Moreover, their experiences show the continuous nature of migration helping individuals learn to balance their cultural identities with the demands of their new social realities. These findings demonstrate how the whole-part-whole approach (Dahlberg et al., 2008) can be applied to understand the participant narratives, culminating in a definition that integrates the insights from all participants, enhancing the overall understanding of their migration journeys. The following definition reflects these insights: The lived experience of Latino voluntary migrants as they acculturate to the United States is a complex journey marked by ongoing transitions characterized by ambiguity, emotional disorientation, cultural adaptation hopes, and personal transformation where individuals seek community integration while confronting linguistic barriers as they strive for acceptance and

belonging, balancing their cultural identity within a new societal context. The upcoming chapter will discuss these findings and offer conclusions and implications as a result of this investigation.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION, CONNECTIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

This phenomenological study aimed to explore the lived experience of Latino voluntary migrants, as they navigate transitions and adapt to the cultural nuances of their new environments. The research questions that guided this research were:

1. What are the lived experiences of migration of Latino voluntary migrants seeking to acculturate to the United States?
2. How does migration lead to transformative learning in the context of acculturation?

This chapter summarizes the study, emphasizing the key conclusions derived from the findings. Additionally, it explored the implications for theory and practice and suggests future research that aims to contribute to the field.

Summary of the Study

Grounded in transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1978) and acculturation theory (Berry, 1992), this phenomenological study investigates the lived experiences of voluntary migrants, highlighting migration as a pivotal life event. These theories facilitated a comprehensive exploration into how the voluntary migration process fosters reflection, challenges pre-existing beliefs, and promotes cultural adaptation and learning. The narratives in this study provide valuable insights into how various dynamics impact participants' learning experiences, identity development, and sense of belonging. By examining the phenomenon of voluntary migration through a small sample of individuals who have lived this experience, this research highlights the concepts and theories that shape its frameworks. This perspective provides a nuanced framework for understanding the intricate dynamics of the voluntary

migration experience, including the learning that arises during cultural transitions, the challenges associated with establishing a sense of belonging in a new environment, and the transformative impact of migration on reshaping identities and perspectives (Bingham, 2023; Gonzales, 2019; Teherani et al., 2015; van Manen, 2014). Ultimately, it presents the complex relationships that developed as participants in this study transitioned from the familiar surroundings of their home countries to the unfamiliar conditions of the United States, all while striving to understand the cultural dissonance they experienced.

Conclusions and Discussions

This phenomenological study comprehensively explores the acculturation experiences of Latino voluntary migrants in the United States. The use of nine participants' narratives highlights the intricate nature of the migration journey. Through this analysis, eight themes emerged, along with nine elements that comprise the phenomenon, encapsulating the emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions of their experiences. The eight themes shaping their migration experience include: (a) Emotional Challenges in Uncertainty, highlighting the unpredictability and stress of entering new environments; (b) Awareness as a Catalysts for Growth, emphasizing self-reflections role in learning; (c) Building Resilience Through Community, showcasing the importance of social support; (d) Personal Growth in New Cultural Environments, reflecting transformative experiences associated with identity development in new cultural settings; (e) Ongoing Changes and Adaptation, illustrating continuous adjustments and transitions associated with new realities; (f) Navigating Cultural Differences, Parenting, Work and Support, addressing the adaption needed to enter new roles associated with parenting, and work; (g) Facing Discrimination, Hate and Racism, examining the impact of rejections by those who practice prejudice toward foreigners and (h) Experiencing Homesickness and Loss of Family

Connections, exploring the reflections made by migrants as a result of their separation from loved ones. From these themes, nine elements were found to constitute the phenomenon of migration, including (a) emotions, (b) learning, (c) adaptation, (d) identity, (e) transitions, (f) adaptation, (g) rejection (h) reflection and the redefinition of (i) home.

While the findings of this study align with Chirkov's (2009) assertion that researchers should investigate the experiences of migrants during their transitions between countries and their interactions within the host nation, this study highlights the necessity of exploring the lived experiences of voluntary migrants not only upon entering a new environment but also in the period leading up to their departure and in the years following their settlement. This exploration is crucial because the data indicated that critical self-reflection and reevaluation of preconceived notions among voluntary migrants did not emerge solely as a result of their exposure to disorienting dilemmas upon entering the host country and encountering new sociocultural dynamics. Instead, such reflections began while they were still in their home countries, provoked by the anticipation of future challenges associated with leaving behind familiar environments and customs. As they prepared to adapt to new cultural norms, navigate language barriers, and engage in sociocultural exchanges within the host nation, this process of reflection initiated and continues to this day. This transition from the familiar to the unfamiliar laid a strong foundation for coping with these new experiences, significantly impacting their attitudes toward learning and influencing their acculturation strategies (Berry, 1997) as they forged a new cultural identity and established a sense of belonging.

Exploring the intersection between migration and acculturation offers valuable insight into the contextual factors that are part of and affect the experiences of voluntary migrants. It revealed the significance of supportive mechanisms that aid their learning, change, and

integration processes while emphasizing how migrants cultivate agency as they gain instrumental knowledge and are empowered to learn through their experiences in a new country. The findings of this study can be summarized in three key conclusions. First, the study identified nine key elements that shape the voluntary migration experience for the study participants. These elements paint a complex picture of voluntary migration, emphasizing that the process is multifaceted and influenced by various personal, social, and contextual factors, thereby demonstrating the complexity of the journeys of voluntary migrants and their interactions with new cultural environments. Second, this study redefines home as transformative learning or “perspective change,” which influenced the acculturation strategies participants adopted in response to cultural dissonance and identity renegotiation in their new environments. This shift allowed participants to reflect on their prior understandings of what home meant to them and their current experiences. Through this reflective process, they reshaped their sense of cultural identity and cultivated a sense of belonging that facilitated either a connection to their heritage or an integration into the new culture they encountered.

In this study, all participants adopted specific acculturation strategies: (a) the integrated strategy, which focuses on blending both cultural identities; (b) the separation strategy, which involves maintaining a strong connection to their heritage while limiting interactions with the host culture; and (c) the assimilation strategy, which entails fully embracing the new culture, albeit with challenges in preserving their original identity. The adoption of these acculturation strategies underscores the significance of relationships, personal context, and holistic approaches to learning. With the concept of home, it is possible to assess how these strategies are implemented, revealing that they are not merely reactions to the host country. Rather, they represent active constructions of meaning that help migrants navigate their place within a new

cultural landscape. This perspective addresses a gap in the existing literature and enhances acculturation theory by integrating the concept of home to better understand the adoption of specific acculturation strategies by voluntary migrants. (Berry, 1997; Delgado et al., 2022; Navar et al., 2005; Sam & Berry, 2010; Shan & Butterwick, 2017; Taylor, 2008).

An analysis of the narratives of the participants in this study provides a deep understanding of the Latino experience of voluntary migration. This exploration revealed the perspective change resulting from this experience and the changing meanings associated with the concept of home as a dynamic concept, one that adapts and transforms throughout the migration journey, recognizing it as more than just a physical space; it serves as an emotional and cultural refuge that enables individuals to cultivate their identities while fostering a sense of belonging. The study effectively addresses its central research questions, providing a nuanced perspective on migration and the acculturation processes that Latino voluntary migrants undergo. It emphasizes the transformative learning that emerges from their experiences and connects migration to broader implications within the field of adult education, especially for those who have voluntarily relocated and established their lives in the United States. The evolving notion of home reflects the resilience and agency of individuals as they navigate their experiences. This redefinition is closely associated with the various acculturation strategies that voluntary migrants adopt, including separation, assimilation, and integration (Berry, 1992). These strategies demonstrate the proactive ways in which individuals engage with and adapt to the cultural landscapes around them. By examining the interplay between these acculturation strategies and the changing perceptions of home, we gain valuable insights into the development of cultural identity and the strong sense of belonging that migrants cultivate in their new environments. This

understanding enriches our appreciation of their journey toward discovering a place they can truly call home.

Conclusion 1: Uncovering the Voluntary Migration Phenomenon: Nine Elements Revealed

The themes that characterize this phenomenon underscore the relationship between the challenges, resilience, and changes experienced by Latino voluntary migrant participants throughout their journeys. These themes offer vital insights that address the first research question. The collective narrative illustrates a journey marked by uncertainties, emotions, and adaptability, demonstrating the learning experiences of the participants (see Appendix B). To this end, the phenomenon can be described as a series of interconnected elements rather than a singular event, in which distinct aspects of the migration experience reveal how Latino voluntary migrants learn to navigate transitions, confront cultural differences, and adjust to new societal norms.

Emotions emerged as a key component that makes up the phenomenon within the different themes, resonating with Mezirow's theory (1978). Participants' narratives indicated emotions manifested as disorienting dilemmas when confronting uncertain transitions. These dilemmas served as catalysts, compelling participants to re-evaluate their expectations, as they learned to navigate their new environments and acknowledged the loss of familiar norms. This process fosters a revision of their identities and realities through critical reflection, reshaping their understanding of personal growth and their ability to navigate unfamiliar situations. It also highlights the significance of emotion in adult learning contexts, showing that awareness of the emotional self is integral to learning across multiple contexts (Dirkx, 2008; Carter & Nicolaidis, 2023; Mälkki, 2012).

The emotional challenges associated with uncertainty, along with the experiences of discrimination, hatred, and racism, offer a nuanced understanding of the social barriers faced by Latino voluntary migrants and their awareness as a catalyst for growth influencing their learning to foster belongingness. As participants navigated cultural differences and the complexities of their new environment, they encountered a lack of support, rejection, and marginalization, often stemming from the characteristics of their speech. Because language plays a crucial role in forging interpersonal relationships and obtaining social support, aiding cultural learning and adjustment to their new sociocultural environment, voluntary migrants became conscious of their social marginalization, expressing feelings of dehumanization, undervaluation, and isolation due to the rejection experienced from members of the host country (Gilpin-Jackson, 2024; Masgoret & Ward, 2006). These themes highlighted how struggles with transition are intricately connected to societal obstacles and the process of adaptation in acculturation. The ambiguity experienced by participants in their migration journeys parallels Nicolaides' (2015) exploration of learning amid uncertainty, where the complexities of *liquid modernity* prompt migrants to adapt to continuously evolving and often unrecognized circumstances, evoking feelings of fear and opening the door to new awareness, thereby nurturing growth. These emotional struggles and rising sensitivities give rise to the disintegration of personality as confusion over individual identity, intensifying feelings of vulnerability, making it difficult to establish a sense of belonging, and obstructing the formation of social connections and full integration into their new cultural environment (Alder, 1975; Cupsa, 2018; Ward et al., 2008). To that end, the elements that make up the phenomenon of voluntary migration explain the evolution of learning in the context of the participants' experiences in response to cultural challenges.

The multifaceted phenomenon of voluntary migration, along with its interconnected components such as emotions, learning, belonging, identity, transitions, adaptation, rejection, reflection, and the concept of home, defines the complexity of the migration process. Emotions served as catalysts and indicators of change, prompting participants to reflect on their experiences and adapt to new circumstances. Learning and belonging emerged as crucial processes through which participants navigated their integration into new communities, fostering a sense of connection and self-efficacy. Identity transformation was central to the voluntary migration journey, as individuals confronted shifts in self-perception and redefined their cultural and personal identities. Transition and adaptation highlighted the ongoing process of change by participants, as they adjusted to unfamiliar social and cultural environments.

Rejection, whether in the form of discrimination or social exclusion, became a significant challenge that participants had to navigate, often leading to feelings of marginalization. Reflection was pivotal in this process, allowing migrants to reinterpret their experiences. The evolving concept of home, transitioning from a fixed place of origin to a dynamic and emotional understanding closely connected to the process of acculturation, effectively addresses the second question of this research, offering valuable insights into how individuals navigate their sense of belonging.

Conclusion 2: Navigating [In]transitional Spaces: Redefining the Journey of Home Through the Voluntary Migration Experience

Voluntary migration serves as a powerful catalyst for transformative learning, particularly within the framework of acculturation. As Mezirow (1978) emphasized, transformative learning is a profound process in which individuals critically reflect on and often reshape their worldviews and frames of reference. This framework is essential for understanding how

migration can lead to significant shifts in an individual's perception of home. Mälkki (2010) highlighted that this process is not only cognitive but also deeply emotional, often sparked by edge emotions that surface in unfamiliar and challenging environments. In this study, the redefinition of home for Latino voluntary migrants emerged as a critical aspect of their transformative learning experience, directly addressing the second research question: How does migration lead to transformative learning in the context of acculturation?

As participants navigated the intricate challenges of voluntary migration and acculturation, their perception of home evolved from a fixed physical location to a fluid personal and emotional concept. Initially, home was viewed as the place they had left behind, where their familial and cultural roots were firmly established. However, as they adapted to new environments, their perspective began to change. They started to reflect more deeply on the true essence of home, which transitioned from being a mere physical space to a broader environment defined by feelings of comfort, happiness, freedom, and safety. This evolving understanding was crucial in providing a sense of protection against uncertainty, particularly in the specific contexts experienced by participants (Gomes, 2002; Lange, 2015).

The changing definition of home highlighted a transformation in their sense of belonging, indicating participants had critically reevaluated their previously held assumptions through active engagement with their new cultural environments, ultimately leading to a transformative learning experience (Mezirow, 1990), where they cultivated a redefined sense of home, while residing in their host countries. The skillful balance of preserving cultural identity while adapting to the societal norms of their new surroundings led to a deeper understanding of self (Alder, 1975; Alfred, 2010; Berry, 1997; Cupsa, 2018). This emotional journey was significant as it reshaped their initial perceptions as voluntary migrants. It fostered an introspective approach to critical

reflection, which is central to transformative learning (Mezirow, 1978, 1990, 2020). As a result, the participants developed a stronger sense of belonging in their new environments, contributing not only to their individual growth but also enriching the cultural landscape of the host country.

The sense of belonging was crucial for the participants in this study, as it significantly affected their feelings of empowerment, productivity, and motivation. When they felt connected to their new community, their levels of engagement increased, facilitating their cultural adjustment as they navigated the process of defining their identities (Marcelo et al., 2016). This differentiation process was essential, allowing individuals to carve out their own space amidst the dynamic interplay of familiar and host cultural influences. The findings highlighted the importance of the participants' migration experiences and their positive aspects, emphasizing the broader quest to establish a sense of 'home' in an ever-changing environment. In these transitional spaces, participants underwent transformations that reshaped their identities, fostered resilience, and helped them navigate the complexities of living between two cultures. By embracing new perspectives on belonging, they learned to manage the challenges of a new cultural environment. This journey enabled them to cultivate a revised sense of home that harmonizes their past experiences with their current realities. Ultimately, it underscored participants' acculturation strategies as they redefined their understanding of home.

Rooted in their original cultures, participants' perceptions of home started when they anticipated dilemmas that emerged before they departed their countries. This preemptive reevaluation extended beyond the initial phases of their migration; it continued throughout the entire process as participants navigated and adapted to their new cultural environments. This transformation underscored the concept of home as a marker of transformative learning during the acculturation process. This insight forms the second conclusion of the study, providing

nuanced insights into how the Latino voluntary migrants participating in this study redefined their senses of home and adopted an acculturation strategy, resulting in a transformed sense of belonging throughout their journey (see Appendix A).

Conclusion 3: Interdependent Dynamics Between Acculturation Strategies and Migration

According to Berry (1997), acculturation strategies refer to how cultural groups and individuals navigate the dual challenges of preserving their original cultural identity while adapting to the host country. These strategies, which include assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization, reflect varying degrees of engagement with the host culture. Through an analysis of the participants' narratives, this study demonstrated how their redefinition of home influenced the acculturation strategies they chose, underscoring the reciprocal relationship between the evolving concept of home and the strategies they adopted within their host country. The findings were revealing: five participants redefined home in ways consistent with the separation strategy, maintaining strong ties to their original cultural identities while minimizing interactions with the host society. This approach reflected a preference for preserving their cultural heritage without extensive engagement in the new cultural context. On the other hand, three participants adopted the assimilation strategy, which involved altering their original cultural identity to integrate more fully with the host culture. For these individuals, home became increasingly defined by the norms and cultural patterns of the host society, indicating a significant departure from their cultural origins. Notably, one participant demonstrated the integration strategy, successfully balancing the retention of their original cultural identity with active engagement in the host society. This strategy allowed for a dual sense of belonging, enabling the individual to redefine home as a hybrid of both their original and new cultural elements. These findings emphasize that participants' redefinition of home, driven by their

evolving cultural identities and their growing sense of belonging, profoundly influenced their acculturation strategies.

Aligned with Berry's (1997) framework, the participants' narratives underscored the complexity of cultural adaptation and the significant impact of the chosen acculturation strategies. This study contributes to the broader discourse in acculturation research by demonstrating the practical application of Berry's theoretical model in real-world contexts. It advances the literature on acculturation by investigating the migration experiences and learning processes of individuals from culturally distinct backgrounds, with a particular focus on the contrasts between U.S. and Latino communities. This investigation fills a critical gap in understanding how individuals from collectivist cultures navigate the cultural disparities they face in a predominantly individualist host society, highlighting their diverse acculturation strategies. Additionally, the study challenged the conventional view that successful integration is primarily determined by the duration of time spent in the host country. The participants' narratives, which spanned from 6 to 34 years (with an average of 21 years), revealed that integration is a more dynamic process shaped by the ongoing negotiation of cultural identities rather than simply by the passage of time. Additionally, the findings highlight the need for further research into similar migrant communities to deepen our understanding of the acculturation process and the significant shifts in perspective that accompany this transformative experience.

The research conclusions offer a richly detailed perspective on the intricate acculturation process in the context of voluntary migration. They emphasize that culture should be understood not merely as an ethnic construct but as a multifaceted phenomenon that spans organizational, regional, national, and interpersonal dimensions. Within the organizational dimension, insights

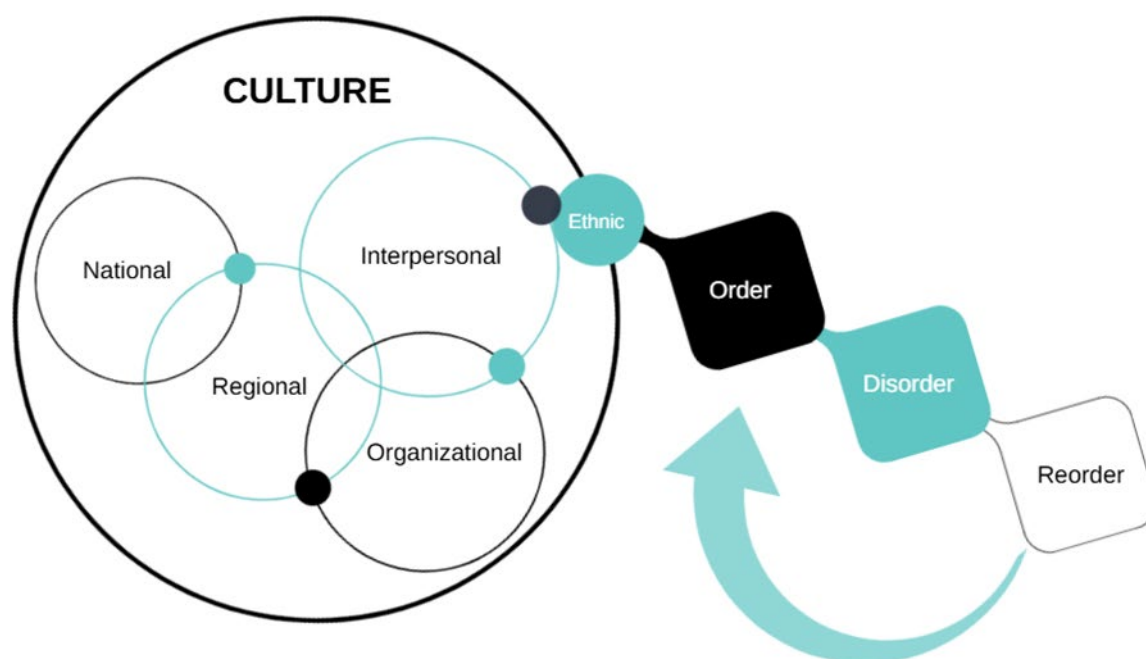
emerge regarding the myriad challenges and valuable learning experiences that participants encounter as they navigate new environments. This aspect highlights the complexities of workplace cultures, which often stand in stark contrast to those found in their home countries, creating a dynamic landscape of adaptation and growth. On a regional level, the study unveils the diverse array of cultural expectations that fluctuate depending on the specific locale within the host country. Factors such as social norms, dialects, and values significantly shape daily interactions, revealing the rich variety of regional identity that influences how migrants experience their new surroundings. At the national level, culture plays a pivotal role in helping individuals acclimate to the overarching cultural framework of the host country. This encompasses embracing societal values and collective norms that are essential for navigating the social landscape and fostering a sense of belonging. The interpersonal dimension of culture involves acquiring new social cues and developing distinctive communication styles, both of which are essential for forming personal and professional relationships. These shifts in cultural understanding reflect a continuous learning process among voluntary migrants, illustrating their efforts to transition from familiar to unfamiliar territory. Each step of this transition represents a reordering of experiences, integral to the journey of integration and the establishment of a new life in a different cultural context (see Figure 7).

The subtle yet significant microlevel changes that participants experienced, as they journeyed between familiar and unfamiliar contexts, proved essential for achieving effective integration. This critical transition, referred to as subject-object integration, plays a pivotal role in the integration process; without it, individuals risk being marginalized and left behind. This theoretical framework provides a compelling lens through which to examine how the reordering of cultural experiences can reshape and reconstruct familiar spaces within entirely new contexts

(Berry, 1997; Delgado et al., 2022; Navar et al., 2005; Sam & Berry, 2010). The findings from this study enhance the ongoing discourse regarding the acculturation process and shed light on the nuanced implications for voluntary migrants as they undergo profound transformations in their identities and strive for integration across diverse cultural landscapes.

Figure 7

Dimensions of Culture Beyond Ethnic



Connections to Theory and Practice

According to Mezirow (1978), individuals are shaped by the cultural perspectives they inherit, yet they also possess the potential to examine and adapt these perspectives critically. The transition from uncritical acceptance of beliefs to a deliberate and contractual engagement with individuals, institutions, and ideologies signifies a crucial advancement in “personal maturity” (p. 105). To this end, transformative learning emerges from the disorienting dilemmas resulting

from the complex migration experience, which cannot be merely resolved through the accumulation of information or enhancement of problem-solving skills. Instead, addressing these dilemmas from sociocultural experiences requires critical self-reflection on how histories and cultural assumptions influence views of oneself and others (Mezirow, 1978). Embracing this process can cultivate a deep understanding and appreciation of diverse perspectives and develop agency to advocate for oneself while enriching personal growth within intercultural interactions. The intersection of transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1978), acculturation theory (Berry, 1992), and the phenomenon of migration explains the transformative journeys of Latino voluntary migrants, revealing the intricacies of personal and cultural evolution inherent in the migration experience. Acculturation theory, as articulated by Berry (1992), outlines the process through which migrants navigate new cultural settings from the ongoing exposure to different cultural interactions while striving to preserve elements of their primary cultural identity. The findings from this investigation underscored the emotional and social challenges accompanying the migration process, highlighting themes related to the interconnectedness of various aspects of the experience. These themes encompass emotions, learning, identity, belongingness, rejection, reflection, adaptation, and a redefinition of what “home” means. Such elements reveal the complexities migrants face, as they attempt to engage with new cultural norms and societal expectations, often accompanied by stress, confusion, and a profound sense of loss (Cupsa, 2018). The struggles inherent in adapting to a new society are a natural part of the acculturation process, as individuals seek to integrate into this new environment, while also preserving their cultural heritage. The emotional elements of these challenges indicate a complex and ongoing struggle between cognition processes and emotional responses. The intricate relationship between emotion and cognitive dimensions of learning, as explained by Carter and Nicolaidis

(2023), is defined as *embodied cognition* and is particularly experienced by voluntary migrants in this study who often navigated complex sociocultural landscapes while grappling with the emotions tied to having to leave their comfort zone. These experiences became catalysts for transformative learning.

As migrants engage with unfamiliar cultural environments, they encounter the opportunity to develop new modes of symbolic representation and reassess their perspectives on themselves, others, and their surroundings. This process, often referred to as culture shock, as defined by Cupsa (2018), emphasizes the immediate emotional, cognitive, and physical responses that arise when adapting to a new reality. They often find themselves negotiating their original culture and the one they are adopting, which leads to significant shifts in their perspectives. These changes are driven by a deep understanding of the complex dynamics within their new environments. This transformative journey encourages migrants to thoughtfully reflect on their core beliefs, values, and identities, fostering personal growth and adaptability. This ongoing process shapes their identities and fosters resilience and a sense of belonging, as they manage the complexities of their dual cultures. Feelings of homesickness, experiences of discrimination, and the challenges of cultural negotiation can all trigger this reflective journey, encouraging new modes of understanding and existence. Consequently, culture shock becomes an important concept for exploring transformative learning narratives, as it provides a foundation for understanding the emotions associated with disorienting experiences. Experiencing culture shock is an active process of confronting change, during which one's sense of identity is gradually deconstructed, restructured, and reorganized. This process requires learning new social skills to thrive in a new environment and developing various coping strategies to manage the

stress associated with change (Cupsa, 2018). All of these elements were present in participants of this study, thus fostering identity reformation and encouraging fresh perspectives on existence.

Findings from this study have added to our understanding of how adults learn, as a process of transformation, and how acculturation and strategies of adaptation take shape. These findings add to the respective literatures of transformative learning theory and acculturation theory. Specifically, this research sheds a more nuanced light on the emotional dimensions of transformative learning, particularly the role of uncertainty and loss as drivers of change. Traditional approaches to transformative learning often emphasize cognitive processes, but this research illustrates how emotional disorientation, such as facing an uncertain future, can trigger critical self-reflection and identity re-evaluation. These approaches are important for scholars of transformative learning because they show how intense emotions, or edge-emotions (Mälkki, 2018), such as uncertainty, fear, nostalgia, and loneliness, can drive deep reflection and change, especially in cultural transitions. In the context of transformative learning theory, the findings of this study show that learning as a finding is far more than acquiring knowledge; it is an existential recognition of one's capacity, purpose, and direction.

The experience explored in the study supports the idea that transformative learning often begins with a disorienting event that breaks through ordinary routines and forces individuals to confront the disconnect between their current lives and their potential. This research enhances understanding of transformative learning theory by highlighting how significant life experiences can serve as powerful catalysts for growth. These experiences encourage learners to confront and overcome internalized limitations, fostering a renewed sense of agency and self-fulfillment. Furthermore, the study expands the concept that adults need to be prepared, willing, and able to engage in transformative learning. The findings indicate that individuals often embrace

challenging learning experiences, even when faced with disorienting events. Notably, eight of the nine participants expressed a willingness to relive the migration process and its inherent challenges, motivated by the new perspectives they gained, which align with the perspective offered that adult learning is a gradual and lifelong journey, guiding individuals from a state of confinement by their existing knowledge to becoming self-transforming individuals (see Appendix A; Cantron, 2016; Merriam & Bierema, 2014; Shan & Butterwick, 2017).

For scholars, recognizing the emotional component of transformative learning presents an opportunity to enrich the understanding of this process, highlighting its complexity beyond rational thought. By acknowledging the interplay between cognitive processes and emotional experiences, researchers can create a comprehensive framework for transformative learning. This understanding is particularly beneficial when studying migrants and individuals facing significant life transitions, as it underscores the importance of integrating emotional considerations into the transformative process. Emphasizing this connection enhances academic discourse and expands the applicability of transformative learning theories in diverse contexts. In addition, this study presents collective benefits for scholars across various academic disciplines, particularly in adult education, migration studies, and acculturation research, bringing a diversity of thought from the perspective of one who has lived, experienced, and researched the phenomenon.

Implications for Theory and Practice

By examining the lived experiences of Latino voluntary migrants, this study presented that life transitions generated learning that is deeply interconnected with the self and society. The findings offered a comprehensive view of transitional experiences, emphasizing the dynamic and ongoing nature of acculturation. This study expanded upon the theoretical foundations of

transformative learning and acculturation by demonstrating how these processes are interwoven in the migrant experience. Scholars and practitioners in the field of adult education can leverage these insights to inform the development of educational programs that support individuals navigating transition processes, particularly those dealing with emotional learning and self-reflection, which are pivotal in facilitating migrants' integration into new environments.

This study provided new insights for researchers exploring the intersection of identity and learning, highlighting how transformative learning and acculturation theory facilitate the continuous learning process that migrants undergo, challenging the linearity in learning associated with culture shock stages (Cupsa, 2018), enabling them to acquire new skills and insights that ultimately transform their senses of self and belonging, revealing that transformative learning during migration is a complex and fluid learning process. Through the participants' narratives, it became clear that the acculturation process involves ongoing, cyclical moments of culture shock, learning, and adaptation, with multiple dilemmas and emotional challenges, arising throughout their journeys. This suggests transformative learning is not confined to a fixed timeline but is instead marked by recurring reflections and critical self-examination, as migrants engage with their original and host cultures.

Transformative learning theory underscores the importance of critical reflection, where migrants confront and reassess their prior beliefs and identities in response to disorienting dilemmas. The emotional and cultural challenges that migrants face facilitate ongoing self-exploration, allowing them to develop new competencies and emotional resilience. This process of continuous learning ultimately leads to a profound transformation in their sense of self and belonging. Acculturation theory, in turn, emphasizes how migrants adapt to new cultural norms while balancing their cultural heritage, fostering a hybrid identity that reflects both their origins

and new environment. Together, these theories provide a robust framework for understanding how personal growth, community support, and cultural adaptation interact to shape the learning experiences of migrants.

The findings also suggest the importance of recognizing the fluid and nonlinear nature of integration. The participants' narratives, which spanned 6 to 34 years (with an average of 21 years), revealed that successful integration is not solely determined by the duration of time spent in the host country but is shaped by the ongoing negotiation of cultural identities. This idea challenges the conventional view that integration is a linear process and highlights the dynamic nature of identity transformation during migration. As such, these theories serve as a foundation for future studies examining how migration not only challenges existing identities but also offers opportunities for profound transformation in how migrants perceive themselves and their place within both their home and host societies.

The insights gained from this study on the lived experiences of Latino voluntary migrants provide valuable guidance for scholars and practitioners in adult education. These findings can enhance the design and implementation of educational, cultural, and transition programs, ultimately fostering a more effective support for this population. By examining the often-challenging personal journeys of migrants, the study offers insights into their acculturation processes, which can guide the creation of more inclusive, empathetic, and culturally responsive educational programs. For practitioners, these insights are crucial for creating learning environments that are attuned to the emotional transitions experienced by migrants. Recognizing the intricate relationship between migrants' cultural heritage and the societal norms they encounter is essential for helping them build confidence, foster a sense of belonging, and achieve both personal and professional growth. Additionally, for those engaged in workforce

development, the study underscores the significance of understanding the learning processes that adults undergo as they adapt to new roles and environments. This understanding is vital for facilitating their successful integration and overall success.

Scholars in the fields of adult learning and acculturation can use these findings to enhance theoretical frameworks that examine the effects of various acculturation strategies on learning outcomes and integration. Considering how the sense of place influences learning engagement and motivation presents an opportunity for theoretical exploration. By integrating insights from traditional adult learning theories with those from migration studies, researchers can better understand how cultural dissonance affects learners' motivations and their abilities to assimilate new knowledge and skills. These enhanced theories can then guide the development of educational programs specifically tailored to meet the unique needs of adult learners in cultural transitions, whether these include ethnic, organizational, interpersonal, national, or regional dimensions.

This research highlighted the importance of examining the concept of home, which encompasses physical space, emotional connections, and social environments. By understanding how these elements interact with personal and cultural identities, we can gain valuable insights into the learning experiences of adult learners in cultural transition. Examining these factors highlights their importance in shaping educational engagement and offers opportunities to enhance existing theoretical frameworks. By integrating the physical, emotional, and social dimensions of learning spaces, we can better understand how stable and unstable conditions influence the learning process. This constructive focus enriches academic discourse and paves the way for educational practices that are more aligned with the diverse realities of learners,

fostering the development of inclusive and effective educational environments that support all adult learners in their journeys.

This study's methodological approach to phenomenology offers a robust tool for understanding the deeply personal and emotional aspects of voluntary migration. By focusing on migrants' subjective experiences, phenomenology helps uncover how participants perceived and navigated the challenges of cultural adaptation and identity reformation. This approach deepens the academic discourse surrounding migration and better aligns educational practices with the lived experiences of learners, ultimately promoting more inclusive and effective educational environments. This study calls for ongoing research to refine these theoretical frameworks and ensure that educational interventions comprehensively address the multifaceted needs of migrating adults. Furthermore, it provides an avenue for scholars in the field of adult learning to investigate the role of edge-emotions in fostering self-reflection, particularly in relation to the migration experience, which often presents disorienting dilemmas linked to cultural transitions.

Chapter Summary

This phenomenological study constructively examined the lived experiences of Latino voluntary migrants as they navigate the complexities of migration and acculturation in the United States. Grounded in transformative learning theory and acculturation theory, the research focused on two key questions: What are the lived experiences of Latino voluntary migrants as they adapt to life in the United States? and how does migration promote transformative learning in the context of acculturation? The findings highlight the significant roles of emotional and social challenges, identity transformation, and community support in facilitating migrants' adaptations and fostering their personal growth. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how

these elements interact to support the successful integration of Latino voluntary migrants into U.S. society.

The findings provide a nuanced understanding of the migrant experience, revealing how uncertainty, emotional struggles, discrimination, and a sense of loss are intertwined with the personal transformation that migrants undergo. These challenges not only shape their emotional and psychological states but also catalyze deep self-reflection and the redefinition of identity and belonging. Key themes, such as emotional challenges in uncertainty, facing discrimination, hatred, and racism, building resilience through community, and personal growth in a new cultural environment, reveal the complex interplay between migration's emotional, social, and cultural dimensions. Additionally, the redefinition of home is a crucial aspect of the transformative learning process, where migrants balance their cultural identity with their new societal context, ultimately reshaping their understanding of home and belonging.

The implications of these findings extend to theory and practice. For scholars, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the emotional and identity-related aspects of transformative learning, particularly in the context of migration. It highlights the necessity of the expansion of research about the emotional dimensions into adult learning theories, suggesting emotional disorientation, homesickness, and uncertainty can be powerful drivers of transformation. For practitioners, the study emphasizes the need for more supportive, culturally responsive programs that address the practical challenges of migration and the emotional and social aspects that migrants encounter. Acknowledging the crucial roles of community, identity, and emotional resilience in the acculturation process can help practitioners more effectively support migrants during their transition journeys. This acknowledgment highlights the need for an in-depth exploration of how emotional challenges affect migrants' learning experiences and

how community support and social networks contribute to resilience and successful adaptation. Lastly, the use of a phenomenological approach to understanding the personal and emotional experiences of migrants allows for a better understanding of migration and helps make educational practices more relevant to what learners experience, ultimately creating more inclusive and effective educational settings. Future research is important to develop these ideas further and ensure that educational support meets the complex needs of Latino voluntary migrants. Addressing these areas can continue to enrich our understanding of the transformative learning process in migration and inform the development of more effective and inclusive adult education programs for culturally transitioning populations.

EPILOGUE

RECONNECTING BACK TO ME

Sitting at the airport once again, surrounded by a symphony of voices and the occasional clatter of luggage, I find myself reflecting deeply on my journey and the invaluable lessons I have learned. Watching the people around me, some rushing to catch their flights, others waiting with loved ones, and many quietly lost in their thoughts, I am struck by a palpable sense of calm I feel. I no longer feel fear as I once did, so different from the apprehension I felt when I departed Panama.

My journey has not been straightforward; it has been a winding labyrinth of experiences, taking one careful step at a time. Leaving behind the familiar and stepping into the unknown has emboldened me to tackle the formidable task of learning a new language. Each misstep and triumph has contributed to my growth. As I navigated the complexities of life, I discovered the nuances of cultural transitions. It is a landscape filled with challenges, yet also rich with opportunities for personal development. Throughout this experience, I have crossed paths with remarkable individuals, each leaving an imprint on my heart and nurturing my compassion and vulnerability. Their stories and kindness have inspired me to continue seeking moments for improvement and growth. I have come to realize that cultural transitions are not merely phases, but a lifelong adventure filled with lessons and discoveries. These varied experiences have illuminated the profound importance of self-care amid the chaos, reminding me to tend to my own well-being as I embrace each new chapter of my life.

As a result of my journey and as a Latina voluntary migrant, I have discovered the power of embracing my feelings as a source of strength. I once viewed vulnerability as a threat to

success, believing that those who showed it were weak; however, I have learned that my vulnerability and openness to feeling deeply are my true strengths. People are drawn to me because of this openness; it represents a raw, unfiltered expression of my experiences and my quest for belonging. This realization profoundly impacted me last year when I found myself wandering through life without purpose, struggling to understand why I left everything I loved behind. It reshaped my understanding and academic journey, which is about more than accolades or recognition. This journey has transformed my worldview, guiding me to embrace a self-authored life where I define my own values and boundaries. More than adapting to new academic and social environments, this experience has allowed me to redefine what home and belonging mean to me. I now understand how these deeply personal and emotional spaces influence my engagement and motivation to learn and grow.

As I take a moment to reflect on my journey, I can clearly see a remarkable transformation that has taken place within me. Gone are the days when I felt like a fragmented individual, struggling to piece together the various facets of my identity. In their place, I now stand as a unified whole, effortlessly weaving together my diverse roles as a mother, educator, daughter, researcher, and learner. This newfound wholeness fills me with a sense of fluidity and confidence I had previously only dreamed of. My experience as a voluntary migrant became an inspiring journey of self-discovery, filled with moments of revelation and insight. With each step I took forward, I embraced not only my accomplishments but also the entire range of experiences that shaped the essence of who I am. I have discovered the powerful balance between vulnerability and strength, realizing that each part of my journey enriches my character. This experience transcends academic achievement; it has become a profound exploration of my true self. My personal growth is a continuous journey of becoming. I learn to embrace the diverse

facets of myself and celebrate their unique contributions. Moving forward, I do so with the powerful realization that I am whole, capable, and ready to take on any challenges that lie ahead because this is a story that has just started.

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APPENDIX A: THE REDEFINITION OF HOME

Participant	Pseudonym	Where is Home?	How you definehome?	Physical Location	Would You Migrate Again?	Years in the USA	Acculturation Strategies
1	Flor	In Panama because there I am ME. Heere, there is a lot of limit for the Hispanic	Flor: A place where you can feel comfortable.	Panama	Yes, having lived what I lived.... Seeing what I have seen, sorry, and how Panama is now I would. Regardless of what happened. No, because I would not have wanted to leave my family	21	Separation
2	Lisa	Home is USA, I live here longer that I live in Panama, without forgiving where I'm coming from Panama will always being in my heart. USA help me build another prospective of living.	Home is were I feel love, appreciate and were I can be whatever I want to be. Maybe I could of have all that in Panamá, but happened here. Home is where is my Family (husband & Kids) and this is were they are from.	USA	100% will do it all over again, the different cultures (inside USA) that I got expose to in all this years enriched my vision on how humanity have different views of the world. Even inside USA living in different states show how different people are and I learn so much out of each one. As a person who love cultures and history this was the best thing could happen to me.	28	Assimilation

Participant	Pseudonym	Where is Home?	How you definehome?	Physical Location	Would You Migrate Again?	Years in the USA	Acculturation Strategies
3	Manuel	Where's home? Here [Atlanta, GA] It's a habit of always thinking where mom and dad are is home. Then I always say I'm gonna go home always mean call my parents, but for me. It really really home is HERE. Like I go somewhere anywhere in the world. I get homesick about being here. Me: In the States specifically? Manuel: In Atlanta. fuck the States [laughter]. I love Atlanta. Atlanta influences everything. Um. Yeah. It's it's. I love it here. I really love it here. I don't allow people to trash about this place like you're my enemy. If you talk trash about this place. You told me. Miami is better. I'll fucking kill you [laughter]...	Me: What makes it home? Manuel: I think it's because I grew up here. You know like, of course I came here in my 19s, 20s. I think I grew up as a person. I discovered who I was. I found myself here. I formed my character. You know. I, I learned about the world and learned about the people. Or it's YEAH. It's where I have found everything.	USA	Yes. I would do it again because even after everything that happened, it was worth it. Even after understanding that arriving in a new place, especially in a different country, a lot of time one has to start from zero.	25	Assimilation

Participant	Pseudonym	Where is Home?	How you definehome?	Physical Location	Would You Migrate Again?	Years in the USA	Acculturation Strategies
4	Cecilia	My home is [home city name, Mexico]. It has not been the United States.	Look, I know it's partly is the beach. The beach calls to me. Is, is, it's like part of me. I love it. I think that's part of it. Other part, it's when we where my mom, my brothers and I. We didn't have my father. But that's when I felt a very big unity among the four of us. In other words, there were none, there was nothing who could...That's what I felt, I still feel it....	Mexico	Yes, as you say, it has definitely been transformative as well. I am not the same person who arrived, but I think that of course, we are never the same people at 24 as we are at 58. [coughing] But it has been enriching because it has opened my mind in many aspects and it has opened doors for me in many aspects as well.	34	Separation

Participant	Pseudonym	Where is Home?	How you definehome?	Physical Location	Would You Migrate Again?	Years in the USA	Acculturation Strategies
5	Maria	[Laughter] Oh, that's the same question I ask myself sometimes. And my daughter too. My daughter tells me "mom, what do I have to answer when they told me where I'm from? Because I was born in Germany, but I am American, but I'm also Panamanian, but I lived in Korea" and I was like "sweetie, you are from the world." And, eh, yeah, and then here [U.S], I don't know. I don't know where is home? that's a very good question. I think home is wherever I am.	A place... Where always gonna feel like home... A place that always gonna. I don't know that. It's gonna be easy and and it's gonna be like warm. Like a happy place for me and a place that I gonna always feel welcome.	Panama	Oh, absolutely. Yes. I would do it again. Because. Because even with the bad things you learn. I mean, it's a growth experience, all the time. And like I say if I stay in Panama, I don't know if I would have all these opportunities. You know. I mean, so you have to get out from your comfort zone and try your bubble and you need to explore. So I like exploring the world. That's my mission now.	23	Separation
6	Alba	I will say that is a little piece on both sides.	Homes is a place where you recharge, and get all the energy and love. Is where you reconnect with your roots and also is a place when your new family is because now my children are here and that's why is in both places.	Both	YES, I would because is a new life. Is a life where one started from zeroand you have a new life. And even as you family grows there is an expansion of yourself.	10	Integration

Participant	Pseudonym	Where is Home?	How you definehome?	Physical Location	Would You Migrate Again?	Years in the USA	Acculturation Strategies
7	Alexa	Where it is home, is, it's for me it's Panama. But I also I've been used to be in in the State that I am, eh, but definitely if I am retirement, I see myself in EUROPE or Panama. Na na na. Panama is my home. I love my country. I definitely, eh, the United States is is a amazing country. And also I can consider it, considered the, is a sorry, a a home too. But first is PANAMA.	Family, food, [laughter], family, food, happiness.	Panama	YES! and I said Europa. Europe	6	Separation
8	Estela	I still believe that Ecuador is home. I still think so, but I don't know for how long. I'm an American Citizen, but I still think that Ecuador is home.		Ecuador	No [laughter]. I don't think so. For the same reason. I would have wanted to negotiate that more. Let's see, we are going to live so long in Ecuador. We are going to live for so long in the U.S. None of that I negotiated. I don't know how things would have been, if I hadn't come here, either. But no, I never thought of coming to the United States, in all honesty, never. Never.	18	Separation

Participant	Pseudonym	Where is Home?	How you definehome?	Physical Location	Would You Migrate Again?	Years in the USA	Acculturation Strategies
9	Erika	I think, going back, My mom-in-law put that SEED on me one time. And she said "Erika your home is HERE." And I was like "she's right." I have been living here for a WHILE. Home is here.... This is what I feel. I am not saying this is my HOUSE. I'm saying this is my HOME. But she used to tell me "YOUR COUNTRY IS WHERE YOU BELONG BUT YOUR HEART BELONGS TO A DIFFERENT HOME NOW." I think that she was just trying to say like, we know THAT YOU ARE FROM PANAMA, we know that YOU LOVE YOUR COUNTRY, we know that you LOVE YOUR HERITAGE, but NOW YOU ARE IN AMERICA, this is your house, this is where you, where YOUR HEART IS...	It's where you feel COMFORTABLE for me.	US	Probably	24	Assimilation

APPENDIX B: THE VOICES OF THE PHENOMENON

Theme	Pseudonym	Example	Rationale	Elements Found	Rationale
Emotional Challenges in Uncertainty	#3 Manuel	Me: Why are you saying it makes you nostalgic? Manuel: Because, you know, sometimes you miss things, you miss flavors. you miss smells....that's pretty much is. [watery eyes] I don't miss people [chuckle] because I have grown without them for so long... But, it's.. it's... Things that are so attached to me...	These highlight the emotional challenges associated with starting a new life and adapting to a new environment where these cultural elements are missing or are hard to find	Emotions	The longing for familiar foods and music highlights deep nostalgia and the emotional challenge of separating from roots. This illustrates how food and music evoke emotions tied to identity and belonging.
	#2 Lisa	I think was... [umm] Uncertain...of, of my future. You're right... Like, I was like... what is going to happen? I wasn't sure. What is? What it was THERE for me? Because remember I left everything. I left even my education there.	Lisa explicitly expresses her feelings of uncertainty regarding her future, indicating a sense of anxiety about the unknown associated with leaving her country and everything she knew behind.		This awareness of the loss due to migration deepens her feelings of uncertainty, as it reflects the physical relocation and the emotional impact of leaving behind familiar structures and support systems.

Theme	Pseudonym	Example	Rationale	Elements Found	Rationale
Awareness as Catalysts for Growth	#3 Manuel	The moment of the accident was for me to realize.... I can't keep doing this. I am wasting my time here, I'm wasting my brain and my intelligence. I need to move forward. I almost lost an arm. I need to get out of my comfort zone. Oh, I felt angry. I felt sad. I was like this is not my journey. I went to school and I need to use it. You cannot just half waist four years of my life and nothing right?!... That moment WAS....It was a breaking point.	Manuel realizes that the accident is a turning point that drives him to change his life. This awareness catalyzes his personal growth, urging him to utilize his education and intelligence despite challenges.	Learning	Manuel's experience shows how life events can trigger deep personal reflection leading to significant learning and shifts in identity. His accident served as a pivotal moment that reshaped his perspective on life.
	#9 Erika	Everything was NEW. Looking at the house, looking at the STREETS and the PEOPLE. The FIRST YEAR trying to get used to knowing around, on the SECOND year, I was getting LONELY....because of my Zodiac sign, if I don't have my family around or know about them I start feeling lonely. So I told myself "do you really want this?" I was DEBATING, I was like "DO I REALLY WANT THIS? So, my mom-in-law, said "what you need is to START WORKING and get your mind busy. You're just in the house and I was like, "maybe SHE'S RIGHT" So on the second year, I applied for jobs and good thing that I saw one for BILINGUAL and I got it right away....	As Erika grapples with loneliness and isolation away from her family, she begins to self-reflect and question if she truly wants her current situation. Her mother-in-law's suggestion to start working shifts her focus from isolation to engagement, helping her find purpose and reconnect with her environment.		Erika's story highlights learning as a discovery through introspection and external advice. Her loneliness uncovers her deep need for family to provide stability and the guidance from her mother-in-law encouraged her to explore new options and find an unexpected solution.

Theme	Pseudonym	Example	Rationale	Elements Found	Rationale
Building Resilience through Community	#2 Lisa	It, it was very hard because I DIDN'T speak the language, and then...NOT ONLY DID I DIDN'T SPEAK THE LANGUAGE... I was in a town that...NOBODY speak Spanish. Everybody was a native American right!?, so everybody speak English. So, like... I said, I went to the church and try to learn English, that they're like, don't be afraid of, like try it...	Lisa finds a supportive environment in her church to help her learn English. Joining a supportive community helps her overcome her language barrier, illustrating that resilience often comes from shared experiences and encouragement.	Belonging	Lisa finds belonging through community activities that help her practice English and connect with others. Her church community provides a supportive environment that fosters resilience and inclusion, despite language barriers.
	#4 Cecilia	I just QUIT MY JOB and I had felt BAD about the way she SPOKE TO ME and I didn't like it. I started to cry. I told him [husband] With my bad English, I don't know, how they [bothers-in-law] even understood me. I saw them as four big ones... all comforting me. "Don't worry. You're going to get another job. We will help you or you don't have to work. Don't you want to work here? What do you want to do here? It was like a barrier against the world. "Nothing bad will happen to you... you know." All I know...like the world that was behind them... nothing was going to touch me.	Cecilia's support network, including her husband and in-laws, empowered her after quitting her job. Their emotional support helped her regain confidence, confront her fear of finding new employment, and foster a sense of belonging with a family different from her own.		Cecilia found belonging in the community with her in-laws. She felt accepted and valued. Their support serves as an emotional anchor, redefining her understanding of belonging and showing that community can be built through supportive relationships.

Theme	Pseudonym	Example	Rationale	Elements Found	Rationale
Personal Growth in a New Cultural Environment	#6 Alba	I feel like it has been almost a fundamental part being far away. For me it has marked me very much, being away from family. I feel like it has been... It has been hard because I have no shared... I feel like I've been HERE but at the same time, but I have wasted that time with them.	Alba's emotional challenges prompt her to reassess her self-perception and identity as she navigates a new cultural context. This experience highlights the impact of separation from loved ones and fosters her personal growth as she copes with feelings of loss.	Identity	Alba's identity develops as she grapples with her sense of self away from her family. She feels torn between her new environment and her cultural roots, which shows her internal conflict and the loss of shared experiences with loved ones.
	#2 Lisa	In my country a cashier is a person who had no education, right?! So... why I had to be a cashier?... I changed my perspective, of what I was doing. So I was like YOU KNOW WHAT?!, this is a school...	This example highlights Lisa's shift in self-perception regarding her role as a cashier, previously viewed as lacking education. She reframes it as a learning opportunity instead of a setback, contrasting with her cultural norms.		Lisa realized she could find meaning in positions she initially disliked. By transforming her past biases and societal judgments, she empowered her growth, enriching her identity and fostering a more adaptable mindset.

Theme	Pseudonym	Example	Rationale	Elements Found	Rationale
Ongoing Changes and Adaptation	#1 Flor	For every immigrant, the case is different. There are many who leave their country because they are being chased, or because a gang or anything else. But for me, in making that decision, it has helped me as a person, even though I have SUFFERED along the way, it has helped me NOT to be the same person I was before, to be more hard-working. And I believe that for every immigrant. They come from their country. They come thinking that everything is going to be rosy, and it is not like that... It teaches us to develop a stronger character, more determined...to have priorities, because in our countries there are no priorities.	Flor presents her journey as a constant process of adaptation to a new reality where everyday life requires hard work to meet basic needs. This shift in perspective highlights how migration is not a one-time transition but an ongoing process of transitions to adapt to new social, economic, and cultural expectations.	Transition	This example highlights the impact of migration on personal growth and adaptation because Flor's experience shows that moving to a new country is not just a change of location but a complex development that reshapes values, priorities, and character.
	#8 Estela	Yeeesss. That, the upbringing of... I mean, the family union. The family union... I had a family like that, not all Americans are that way. I have other friends than their in-laws and parents are different. That... but as I said, I think I'm getting over it. It has already been, my son, the oldest, is 13 years old. I mean, I said, it is what it is, I have to pretend I'm crazy, I can't do, one cannot change things.	Estela learned to accept the differing U.S. family dynamics compared to her values, realizing she "can't change things" and "pretend [she's] crazy," which emphasized the adjustments needed to navigate cultural divides in family unity.		Estela's journey highlights her struggle to adapt to a new culture, involving both physical relocation and a shift in understanding and acceptance.

Theme	Pseudonym	Example	Rationale	Elements Found	Rationale
Navigating Cultural Differences, Parenting, work and support	#1 Flor	The Americans... In the way they raise their children? They have a child one month, two months they leave the kid in a school. I was never raised in that way. My mom stayed with us, she never worked. And I think that was one of the shocks. Now I say you have to do what you have to do. I came to change that way of thinking.... Over time, when I continued to live in the US. No, it's not because I wanted to leave him, it's because I HAD to do it. Everything here is I HAVE to do it, right? Here in the US is like that.	Flor experienced culture shock with the American practice of sending infants to daycare, which contrasted with her upbringing where mothers stayed home. She adapted and came to understand that many U.S. mothers have to work, reshaping her views on parenting norms.	Adaptation	Flor experienced a shift in perspective as she comes to understand and accept new cultural practice that conflicted with her values. By reconciling her beliefs with her new realities she demonstrates the cognitive adjustments she made to adapt to new cultural norms.
	#9 Erika	Our Latino culture is WONDERFUL the AMERICAN culture is like a PIECE OF ICE TO ME. We care for our neighbors, you know WE SHARE stuff, like neighbor take my cucumber, I don't remember another one but, when I DID realize knowing little by little AMERICANS. um, they are so SELFISH. And THEY WILL LET YOU KNOW, sometimes. um, And ...they will SHOW IT. Um... Nothing, nothing with uh with racismo, AT ALL, but it's THE WAY THEY ARE. So that's that's what it kind of SHOCKED ME, to be honest, the way of that the the American culture.	Erika perceives American culture as more individualistic, often feeling it is "like ice, selfish," and unwelcoming. This contrast between her expectations of community and the realities of a more individualistic host country highlights the emotional complexity of adapting to differing cultural values.		As Erika adapts to professional settings, she notices that her home culture emphasizes community and camaraderie, while U.S. workplace interactions vary widely. This realization prompts her to adjust to her new environment to better integrate into American culture.

Theme	Pseudonym	Example	Rationale	Elements Found	Rationale
Facing Discrimination, Hatred and Racism	#1 Flor	RACIST! I saw a lot of racism back then wiith Hispanic people. They [Americans] did not like that one spoke Spanish. They treated you badly because you spoke Spanish or they would say you I don't understand you. If you tried to speak English. I mean, that's what struck me the most. Because I say we are all equal, they should be more giving, more different in that sense, right?	Flor reflects on the prejudice she faced as a Spanish speaker in the U.S., noting negative reactions from Americans when she spoke Spanish. Her experiences highlight the discrimination migrants endure due to language.	Rejection	The refusal to engage with Flor as she speaks English highlights rejection based on her ethnicity, undermining her sense of belonging showing how these differences can result in social exclusion.
	#5 Maria	We were doing laundry, and it was pouring raining SUPER HEAVY. And my sister told me go and take the car and get the clothes... It should be done. I didn't see any parking spots, it was just one and it wasn't a visitor parking. I'm just gonna run with my basket, take all the clothes from the dryer less than five minutes. When I was coming the owner of the parking lot coming back, and he parked his car and came out and started yelling at me. He is like "What are you doing in my parking spot? that's the problem with YOU with YOUR PEOPLE. You want me to call immigration?" He assumed that just because I was an immigrant. I was illegal. I wanted to tell him called them. I don't have anything to be afraid of."	The experience left her feeling powerless and deeply frustrated highlighting the emotional toll of discrimination on immigrants and underscores the unfair assumptions many face in everyday interactions.		Maria's encounter with a man who assumed she was undocumented based on her appearance exemplifies a stark form of rejection. This experience left her feeling powerless and devalued, highlighting the emotional toll that rejection based on stereotypes can impose on migrants.

Theme	Pseudonym	Example	Rationale	Elements Found	Rationale
Experiencing Homesickness and Loss of Family Connections	#1 Flor	The transformation it gave me was that I am more attached to my family back in Panama. When I came here I didn't feel that attachment... But now that I'm here. I am more sensitive to that part. I want to SPEND MORE TIME with them because I am not with them here. It's something... You miss... One feels the distance and that familiar warmth that I did NOT...at the time I came...I, like... I don't need my family, I don't need that family warmth. But as time goes by, being here for me, my family is the most important thing now.	Flor initially felt independent and distant from her family, but living abroad heightened her longing for familial bonds. This shift reveals how distance can intensify homesickness and reshape one's appreciation for connections and belonging.	Reflection	Flor's reflection on her changing family relationships post-migration emphasizes the significance of familial bonds and how migration encourages individuals to reevaluate their values and identity, highlighting its transformative effects on personal growth.
	#4 Cecilia	I say in that, in that aspect I was very lucky, because the, the first, the first two weeks were spent on [name of a Lake] and on boats and riding around on jet skis. That's where I was lucky. I was lucky... I did indeed get this homesick thing, as they say here and I still have it. But I met [husband's name] very soon and I tell you, his family not only accepted me, but my whole family too, immediately.	Although Cecilia adapts well with her husband's supportive family, after many years of living in the US she still experiences lingering homesickness. Her statement show how homesickness can persist despite having positive experiences and supportive relationships.		Cecilia reflects on her initial homesickness upon arrival, noting how her husband's family accepted her, which eased her transition. This highlights the importance of support in adapting to a new environment and managing the emotional challenges of being away from home.