

## Using Occupations to Bridge the Cultural Divide: The Experiences of Immigrant Women

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- Introduction: During the immigration process, individuals are transitioning from a familiar context and culture to the "host" country whose norms and expectations may be unknown and confusing. The orchestration of everyday occupations that contributed to their self efficacy, role fulfillment and their identity is disrupted by migration. Immigrants need to adapt to new ways of occupational engagement to find their sense of "being in place" in their new context. This presentation will demonstrate the critical role occupations play in the reconstruction of the lives and identities of immigrants. The environmental enablers and barriers to full participation will also be presented.
- Objectives: (1) Describe the patterns of disruption of occupations in the lives of immigrant women and (2) Describe ways in which the women reorganized their "occupational" lives to reclaim their identities and find their place in the new culture.
- Methods: A series of qualitative studies were conducted with a total of 30 women who came to the U.S. from three continents. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to elicit stories about their immigration experience. Data was analyzed through a combination of phenomenology, framework analysis and grounded theory.
- Results: All the women expressed a need to maintain culturally-significant occupations, used occupation as vehicle of acculturation and adaptation, and struggled in balancing personal adaptation with those of their children. The cost of migration included occupational loss, imbalance, deprivation, alienation, and marginalization. Despite barriers to participation, the women used creative adaptive strategies to engage in occupations in meaningful and productive ways.
- Conclusion: This research confirms and extends previous findings regarding the challenges of occupational adaptation following major life transitions and their impact on health. Immigrant women face a multitude of challenges to occupational engagement in their everyday lives.
- Contribution to the practice/evidence base of occupational therapy: Occupational therapy can promote health and well being by helping immigrants balance adaptive with culturally meaningful patterns of occupational engagement in their new context. This study validates occupation as a health determinant.