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Psychosocial Adjustment Of Spanish Emigrants And Non-Emigrants

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to verify whether psychological adjustment, social support and mental health are better among Spanish non-emigrants than Spanish who immigrate to other parts of Europe, and to analyse the influence of gender and employment status. The sample is based on 384 Spanish men and 780 Spanish women ($N = 1164$), 494 of whom moved to England, 364 to Germany and 306 are living in Spain. The results show differences related to migration situation, gender and employment status. However, the most important conclusion is that employment status plays a more significant role than migration situation in explaining the psychosocial adjustment of Spanish people.

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1. Introduction

In recent years the economic crisis has been driving more and more Spanish people to immigrate to other countries. In 2012, 1,921,248 Spanish were living in foreign countries, an increase of 17% over the previous year [1]. Immigration, acculturation and associated processes can produce considerable stress on migrants [2]. This stress has been largely associated with negative psychological consequences [3, 2]. Thus, the acculturation stress hypothesis states that when immigrants find it difficult to cope with challenges and situations of extraordinary stress, mental health disorders may appear [4]. This hypothesis has been confirmed by the results of several studies [e.g. 5]. However, there is research that rejects or only partially confirms the stress-acculturation hypothesis [6, 7]. Koneru et al. (2007), for example, conclude that some studies have found a beneficial association between increased acculturation and mental health, whereas others have found a detrimental association or no relationship. In this

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regard, Markides and Coreil (1986) defend the “immigrant health paradox” in which immigrants have better physical and psychological health than the native-born, despite their lower socioeconomic level. Two main explanations have come to dominate the research on this paradox [8]: health is protected by cultural factors, and migrants are selected by health status, with healthier people emigrating.

Furthermore, unemployment and job insecurity are factors that reduce psychological well-being and mental health [9], especially in emigration situations [10, 5]. In addition, there is empirical evidence that women, especially immigrants, have more difficulties and stressors than men, and consequently, their mental health is worse [3,10]. Taking into account new Spanish immigration to other countries in Europe, the aim of this study was to test whether psychosocial adjustment (psychological adjustment, social support and mental health) of Spanish immigrants was different from non-emigrants, as well as the differences in these variables depending on sex and the employment status.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

The sample is based on 1164 Spanish people ($n = 384$ men and $n = 780$ women), with an average age of 28.8 years ($SD = 5.7$; ages ranged from 18 to 55 years). The sample is distributed among Spanish people who moved to Germany ($n = 364$), England ($n = 494$) and those who are still living in Spain ($n = 306$). There were no significant differences in the distribution of gender [$\chi^2(2, N = 1186 = 2.65, p = .26)$] and educational level [$\chi^2(2, N = 1166 = 21.59, p = .09)$].

2.2. Measures

Socio-demographic characteristics. This questionnaire collects information about socio-demographic characteristics, as well as the migration process in the case of emigrants.

Stress. Perceived Stress Scale [PSS-14; 11; 12]. The PSS-14 has 14 items (**using a 5-point scale**). **In this study** Cronbach’s alpha was .86.

Satisfaction with life. Satisfaction With Life Scale [SWLS; 13, 14]. **The SWLS is a short 5-item instrument (using a 5-point scale, 1 strongly disagree – 5 strongly agree)**. Cronbach’s alpha was .86.

Social Support. Social Support Survey [MOS; 15, 16]. We used two subscales: emotional support (8 items) and tangible support (1 item). In the current study **internal consistency was excellent ($\alpha = .95$)**.

Mental Health. General Health Questionnaire [GHQ-28; 17, 18]. The scale has 4 subscales that assess somatic symptoms, anxiety, social dysfunction, and depression, each containing 7 questions (using a 4-point scale). The Cronbach’s alpha was acceptable for the overall scale ($\alpha = .92$) and for the four subscales (somatic symptoms $\alpha = .85$; anxiety $\alpha = .89$; social dysfunction $\alpha = .82$; depression $\alpha = .74$).

3. Results

We computed a 2 x 2 x 3 ANOVA with emigrant (yes/no), gender (man/woman) and employment status (employed, unemployed, other status: student and housewife) as between-subjects. The dependent variable was *stress*. There was one significant main effect of employment status $F(2, 1174) = 10.77; p < .001, \eta^2 = .018$, and a significant interaction between emigrant and gender, $F(1, 1174) = 3.99; p = .046, \eta^2 = .003$. Unemployed people perceived more stress ($M = 2.02$), than those employed ($M = 1.76$) ($p < .001$), but there were no significant differences between unemployed participants and other employment status participants ($p = .10$). It was observed that emigrant women ($M = 1.85$) perceived more stress than emigrant men ($M = 1.67$), ($p < .001$). However, in the non-emigrant group there were no differences between men and women ($p = .83$). In a 2 x 2 x 3 ANOVA for *satisfaction with life*, employment status was statistically significant, $F(2, 1174) = 10.23; p < .000, \eta^2 = .017$.

Unemployed people had lower satisfaction with life ($M = 3.07$) than those employed ($M = 3.45$) ($p < .001$) or with other status ($M = 3.51$) ($p < .001$).

A $2 \times 2 \times 3 \times (2)$ mixed-model ANOVA with emigrant, gender and employment status as between factor and social support as repeated measures factor (social network vs. emotional support) revealed a significant main effect of emigrant, $F(1, 1174) = 64.69$; $p < .000$, $\eta^2 = .052$, and four significant interactions: Social support x Emigrant, $F(1, 1174) = 58.80$; $p < .000$; $\eta^2 = .048$; Social support x Gender, $F(1, 1174) = 8.83$; $p = .003$; $\eta^2 = .007$; Social support x Emigrant x Employment status $F(1, 1174) = 3.26$; $p = .039$; $\eta^2 = .006$; and Social support x Gender x Employment status $F(1, 1174) = 3.14$; $p = .044$; $\eta^2 = .005$. The analyses of Social Support x Emigrant x Employment status interaction indicate that emigrants had a smaller social network than non-emigrants in three types of employment status ($p_s < .001$). Employed emigrants had a larger social network than unemployed emigrants ($p = .001$), but there were no differences between employed and unemployed non-emigrants. In relation to emotional support, employed emigrants and other employment status emigrants had lower levels of emotional support than employed non-emigrants and other employment status non-emigrants, respectively ($p_s < .001$). Moreover, the post-hoc analysis of Social Support x Gender x Employment interaction indicated that employed women perceived more emotional support than employed men ($p = .050$). Nevertheless, there were no significant differences between men and women in the unemployed group or in the other employment status group.

We conducted a $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times (4)$ mixed-model ANOVA with emigrant, gender and employment status as between factors and mental health as repeated measures factor (somatic symptoms, anxiety and insomnia, social dysfunction, and severe depression) and found two significant main effects, emigrant [$F(1, 1174) = 8.54$; $p = .004$; $\eta^2 = .007$] and employment status [$F(1, 1174) = 7.75$; $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = .013$], and two significant interactions: Mental health x Gender, $F(3, 3522) = 8.59$; $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = .007$, and Mental health x Employment, $F(3, 3522) = 2.41$; $p = .025$; $\eta^2 = .004$. According to the post-hoc analysis of Mental health x Gender interaction, women had higher levels of somatic symptoms ($p < .001$) and anxiety ($p = .014$) than men, but there were no differences for social dysfunction or depression. Finally, in relation to Mental health x Employment interaction, it was found that unemployed people had higher levels of anxiety ($p = .013$), social dysfunction ($p < .001$) and depression ($p < .001$) than employed people. Moreover, the employed group showed more social dysfunction and depression than the other employment group ($p = .003$, and $p = .003$, respectively).

4. Discussion

The levels of stress, satisfaction with life and psychological symptomatology in Spanish emigrants are equal to those of Spanish non-emigrants. These results support the immigrant health paradox [19] confirmed in previous studies [e.g., 7]. The social support of the Spanish emigrant was lower than that of the non-emigrant, but psychological adjustment and mental health were similar. Why this paradox in the Spanish immigrants in Europe? There are different possible explanations: for example, the level of education of emigrants is higher than the average in the Spanish population; emigrants have a good knowledge of the language of the new country; and migration is to European countries with which they share certain values and life customs. This can make adaptation among the Spanish emigrants to the new culture relatively easy, and therefore, introducing no significant changes in psychosocial well-being.

As for employment status, unemployed people perceived lower satisfaction with life, more stress, anxiety, depression and social dysfunction than the employed people. This result confirms that the lack of employment affects the mental health of both emigrants and non-emigrants [9, 10, 5]. Moreover, unemployed Spanish emigrants had a smaller social network than employed people. It is logical to think that a limited network impedes the search of employment, and, when employment is obtained, individuals have more opportunities to increase the social network. Moreover, some gender differences were found in mental health. Specifically, women showed more anxiety and somatization than men. These results partially confirm women's vulnerability in relation to the mental health [e.g., 3, 10].

In conclusion, the migratory process does not always generate psychological or mental health disturbance. It seems that for Spanish people employment status is more important than their emigrant or non-emigrant status in terms of psychological adjustment and mental health.

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