

Spring 4-2021

Occupational Engagement and Integration Among Egyptian Coptic Orthodox Immigrants

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46409/sr.YIOF1261>

This project was reviewed and approved by the University of St. Augustine for Health Sciences Institutional Review Board (IRB # 1205-283).

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Recommended Citation

Manoly, S. (2021). *Occupational Engagement and Integration Among Egyptian Coptic Orthodox Immigrants*. [Doctoral project, University of St Augustine for Health Sciences]. SOAR @ USA: Student Capstone Papers Collection. <https://doi.org/10.46409/sr.YIOF1261>

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OCCUPATIONAL ENGAGEMENT AND INTEGRATION AMONG EGYPTIAN COPTIC
ORTHODOX IMMIGRANTS

by

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has been approved

April, 2021

APPROVED:

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Abstract

Background: The Egyptian Coptic Orthodox (Copt) population in America has grown exponentially due to religious intolerance in Egypt. Many Copts experience feelings of helplessness because of the stark difference in American culture compared to their home culture. Occupational therapy (OT) is a profession that can impact the experience of Copts through participation in meaningful occupations. This qualitative study sought to answer the research question, “what is the current state of occupational engagement for recently immigrated Coptic immigrants?” **Methods:** Eighteen participants filled out the 9-question open-ended survey concerning overall perceptions about moving to America. Data was analyzed using thematic analysis. **Findings:** The seven overarching themes identified were consistent with the literature about the immigrant experience; participants stated their experience moving was challenging, and overwhelmingly stated that services to ease transition into American lifestyle would have been beneficial. **Conclusion:** Findings from this study should allow for OT practitioners (OTPs) to expand knowledge about the impact of immigration for minority groups such as Copts using evidence-based practice, and facilitate the enculturation of Copts by re-establishing daily occupational routines and engaging in education on new cultural norms associated with American culture while keeping ties to Egyptian culture.

Keywords: acculturation, Coptic orthodox, enculturation, occupational therapy, qualitative

Introduction

The Coptic Orthodox community is unique in that it is acknowledged as being composed of the remaining descendants of the civilization of the ancient Egyptians with Pharaonic origins (Evans, 2013; Hichy et al., 2013). The word “Coptic” is derived from the ancient Greek word for “Egyptian,” and the term “Coptic Orthodox” describes Orthodox Christians who are Egyptian (Evans, 2013; Hichy et al., 2013). Coptic Orthodox Christians (Copts) are a minority population in Egypt, making up an estimated 10% of Egypt’s total population; the Muslim population make up the majority of Egypt’s total population with an estimated 85% (Raemdonck, 2019). Coptic Orthodox Christians face injustices in Egypt on a daily basis because they are a minority group; examples of Coptic persecution in Egypt have included not getting permission to build churches, not being allowed to hold government positions, being openly discriminated against, and being lynched by extremist Muslims (Hichy et al., 2013; Raemdonck, 2019; Evans, 2013; Awad, 2010). The predominantly Muslim government is criticized for frequently ignoring the persecution of the Coptic people.

The Coptic people has the unique role of retaining their Egyptian, Coptic, and American identities as an immigrant; this is a role shaped by a Coptic immigrant’s ethnic identity and religion (Brinkerhoff, 2016; Amin, 2020). In 2015, there were approximately 248,000 Egyptian immigrants living with their families in the United States, many of them Coptic Orthodox (Migration Policy Institute [MPI], 2015). Since then, these numbers have increased, especially in California, New Jersey, and New York (MPI, 2015). California has the largest number of

Egyptian immigrant residents in the United States (MPI, 2015). Around 23% of Egyptian immigrants are living under the poverty level in the United States (MPI, 2015). Many Copts move to the United States and experience isolation, loneliness, and feelings of helplessness because of the stark difference in American culture compared to the culture and community they had left behind in their home land (Awad, 2010; Moradi & Hassan, 2004).

Occupational disruption is described as a temporary disturbance to a person's usual routine of occupational engagement and performance (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2020). On the other hand, occupational engagement is defined as partaking in occupations that are individually and/or collectively valuable (Hammell, 2017). The common challenges immigrants of any race, religion, or ethnicity usually face when entering and resettling a new country include not knowing the common language fluently, how to drive, or how to acquire a job (Suto, 2013). The culture shock that immigrants face often hinders their ability to transition smoothly into a new country and results in financial hardships, emotional distress, and physical ailments (Suto, 2013; Pooremamali, 2011). Having both a strong ethnic identity and a strong national identity is best for optimal adaptation so that the immigrant adheres to their culture while adapting to a new one simultaneously; the process consists of enculturation and acculturation (Gupta & Sullivan, 2013). Acculturation involves receiving a culture, while enculturation involves retention of the home culture; part of the immigrant experience is to straddle a fence between two cultural worlds (Meca et al., 2018). Awad (2010) described this process as integration, which is defined as an individual being completely immersed in the dominant and ethnic society, as opposed to assimilation, which would mean that the individual is less immersed in the ethnic culture and more immersed in the dominant society. The Egyptian government has failed to redress laws and governmental practices in Egypt that discriminate

against Copts, which results in an acculturation of Coptic identity even in the home country of the Copts (Hichy et al., 2013).

Occupational therapy (OT) is a unique profession in that it focuses on helping people gain independence, meaning, and satisfaction in all aspects of the client's life: emotionally, physically, spiritually, and mentally (AOTA, 2020). Occupational therapy practitioners (OTPs) best achieve these characteristics via participating and engaging in occupation, which is defined as what the clients find meaningful (Darawsheh et al., 2015). There is limited research within the field of occupational therapy (OT) that addresses the disruption that immigrants face when using participation in occupation as therapeutic intervention. Cross cultural competency, which is the ability to understand and relate to people of different cultures, is poorly understood in relation to OT practice and leads to inconsistencies within the delivery of OT services to clients of different cultural backgrounds within America (Darawsheh et al., 2015). Research has shown that an immigrant's participation and engagement in meaningful occupations reciprocally connect to their identity in their home country as well as to the environment in their new country where the occupations occur (Huot & Veronis, 2018). For an immigrant to manifest good health (meaning emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual health) in a foreign country, participation in cultural, societal, community and leisure occupations should be encouraged and facilitated (Suto, 2013). These processes can be achieved using daily occupation as a tool that develops occupational and social identity (Suto, 2013; Gupta & Sullivan, 2013).

Recent Coptic Orthodox immigrants from Egypt to the United States are a group of people that have suffered religious intolerance and injustice; therefore, they often feel helpless in their new country (Awad, 2010). The combination of past traumatic experiences can impact occupations within the area of instrumental activities of daily living, such as home management,

driving and community mobility, financial management, and health maintenance (Pooremamali, 2011). Research findings suggest that participation in meaningful occupations can be used as a coping mechanism and as an avenue to deal with trauma (Mondaca & Josephsson, 2013).

OTPs who work with this specific population of Coptic Christians will have to be aware of the complex background they have, as most faced discrimination at home just for being Christian and now face a new set of problems in their new country. An occupational therapist can have a significant impact on the quality of life of this population by using meaningful occupations to simultaneously enculturate American culture and acculturate Egyptian culture in a harmonious balance.

Positionality

I (primary author) am someone of Coptic background, who was born and raised in the United States since the 1990's. I traveled to Egypt every summer, and kept strong ties to my culture. I have seen firsthand how Coptic treatment and persecution affects the lives of the Coptic people for the worst. I also have firsthand experiences of my own of being discriminated against due to visibly being a minority in Egypt. This experience has led me to want to research the experience of the Coptic people. The second author is someone of a White, European, and Catholic faith background who is native born in America and has no recent family experience of immigration. The third author is an occupational therapist who is of Coptic descent. She provided mentorship during the primary author's capstone from both an occupational therapy and a Coptic perspective.

Methods

Research Question

The research question for this project was the following: What is the current state of

occupational engagement for recently immigrated Coptic immigrants? These responses were then analyzed to determine what is the potential role of OT supporting immigrant groups.

Participants

Inclusion criteria for this study included immigrants over the age of 18 who moved to the United States from Egypt within the past five years. The inclusion criteria had to be adapted due to the COVID-19 pandemic; because little to no immigrants migrated to America within the past year, the inclusion criteria had to be expanded to include participants who migrated within five years. A total of 18 participants completed the survey, with most being above 30 years of age.

Study Design

Prior to developing the survey questions, it was necessary to look at previous literature that has addressed occupational disruption of immigrants a new country. Another purpose of the literature review was to determine the role of occupational therapy in combating occupational disruption and encouraging engagement, which will be discussed in the implications for OT section. After an extensive literature review, the occupations that was mentioned most that attributed to occupational disruption included social participation and religious participation. The findings were used to develop a 9 question open-ended survey to understand the occupational disruptions in activities of daily living for the Coptic Orthodox immigrant population. The survey included nine open ended questions that asked participants to provide responses about the source of their occupational disruption upon moving to America; other items were included to determine demographic information such as age, and when exactly the participant moved to America. The survey link was disseminated through Microsoft Forms in 2020, and was distributed by posting the link on a Facebook support group for Egyptian newcomers within the United States and through members of a local Coptic Orthodox Church in the Orange County

Area. The Facebook group had a total of 17,600 members and the local church has an estimated population of 300 people; a total of 18 participants that received the link and were eligible participated and filled out the survey. An Arabic translator from the local Coptic Orthodox Church was consulted to translate all recruitment materials and the survey questions into Arabic for those who could not read or speak English. The data was translated before thematic analysis, and the accuracy of the translation was ensured by consulting the translator multiple times to review the material.

Table 1

Survey Questions

1. How old are you?
2. How many years ago did you move?
3. How has moving from Egypt affected your social participation with peers in America?
4. How has moving from Egypt affected your social participation with peers in Egypt?
5. What are your overall feelings about moving to America?
6. What are your overall feelings about American culture?
7. What activities of daily life do you feel has been most affected by the move? (i.e. money management, working, child care management, etc).
8. Do you feel like your religious participation has been impacted since the move, and if so in what way?
9. Are there any services you wish you had available upon moving (i.e. help finding work, help finding places to live, etc)?

كم عمرك

منذ كم سنة انتقلت؟

كيف أثر الانتقال من مصر على مشاركتك الاجتماعية مع أقرانك في أمريكا؟

كيف أثرت هجرتك من مصر الى امريكا علي علاقاتك الاجتماعيه مع اصدقاءك في مصر؟-

٢- ما هو احساسك العام عن هجرتك الي امريكا؟

٣- ما هو احساسك العام عن المجتمع الامريكي؟

٤- ماذا تعتقد قد تغير في عاداتك اليوميه بعد الهجره الي امريكا، (علي سبيل المثال، تعاملك مع الاموال، الاحوال في الشغل الجديد، العنايه بالاولاد ومثاله)؟

هل تعتقد ان اشتراكك الديني تغير كثيرا بسبب الهجره؟ وان كان كذلك اوصف كيف تغير عن ما قبل الهج-

هل هناك أي خدمات ترغب في أن تكون متوفرة لديك عند الانتقال (مثل المساعدة في العثور على عمل ، والمساعدة في إيجاد أماكن للعيش ، وما إلى ذلك)؟

When the survey was initially distributed in March 2020, survey question 3 was phrased “How has moving affected your social participation with peers?” Every participant interpreted and answered this question in reference to peers still in Egypt, even though the researchers’ intent was to be about peers in America. Therefore, to ensure validity of the research, an amendment was made and approved by the IRB to rephrase the question to be two separate questions: (a) “How has moving affected your social participation with peers still in Egypt” and (b) “How has moving affected your social participation with peers in America?”

Data Analysis

The data from the survey questions were analyzed manually guided by thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding techniques were combined to be an open (bottom-up) vs template (top-down) approach; this allowed for participant data to be coded based on participant responses, and also allowed for concepts to be drawn in from the literature review (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Blair, 2015). Hand-written mind maps were used to identify themes, which are a visual representation technique used to sort and connect codes into different categories or groups (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Main themes were developed after multiple revisits to review codes; some initial codes became main themes and some became subthemes. The codebook was compared to an extensive literature review that was conducted prior to this survey to fully understand the occupational needs of immigrants in America. The extensive and exhaustive process of coding and comparing themes from the survey responses to themes in the literature was an attempt to minimize bias, ensure researcher triangulation of data, and enhance truthworthiness of the research and results (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Researcher triangulation

was also achieved through discussion of the survey results with the doctoral coordinator and mentor (second and third author) as each potential theme emerged. The themes were validated through active discussions and comparisons to the existing literature. Peer debriefing provides an external check on the research process, which therefore increases credibility in a qualitative study (Nowell et al., 2017). The primary author also took extensive measures to minimize bias and enhance trustworthiness by taking time to expand expertise regarding lived immigrant experiences via watching documentaries, listening to podcasts, streaming virtual seminars with expert speakers in the field, and reading books on the topic. All external measures taken were recorded in a logbook with a total number of hours recorded.

Findings

Seven themes were identified from the survey responses: lack of time to complete meaningful occupations, positive feelings about American life and culture, negative feelings about American lifestyle and culture, starting a new life is challenging, religious participation affected for the worse, socialization affected negatively with peers in Egypt, and achieving balance between acculturation and enculturation. The survey also had participants state which occupations were most disrupted since the move. Based on survey responses, the occupations that participants found most disrupted upon moving were the following: work, child rearing, health management and physical activity, religious and spiritual expression, and social participation.

Table 2

List of Occupations Participants Directly Stated Were Affected Due to the Move

Occupation	Number of Codes
Financial management	6

Work	5
Time management	4
Child care services	4
Social participation	3
Religious participation	2
Physical care	1
Psychological care	1

Note. This table listed the occupations affected and the amount of times it was mentioned by participants. This information was used to create a guideline for future implications in occupational therapy to keep in mind when treating immigrants. This will be discussed in further detail in the Implications for OT section.

Lack of Time to Complete Meaningful Occupations

Most participants stated that time constraints did not allow for them to complete meaningful occupations, with demands from work being the most common response. The occupations that participants stated were directly affected due to lack of time were religious participation and social participation. While other occupations were not stated, it can be assumed that OT interventions aimed at improving engagement in meaningful occupations despite time commitments can be beneficial for immigrants to complete a wide range of meaningful occupations. Participant 4 stated “ نعم تغير كثير كل قبل الهجرة كان يوجد الكثير من الوقت للقيام بالانشطة الدينية “ [yes, a lot changed... before the migration there was a lot of time to do religious activities, but after the migration there is no time].” Participant 14 stated “time has

become very tight to participate [in occupations].” These responses indicate that time management would be beneficial to improve quality of life so that meaningful occupations other than work can be prioritized.

Starting a New Life is Challenging

Starting a new life in a new country is often challenging, especially for an immigrant who is less aware of the values, culture, and customs of the new country. Most participants stated that their move was challenging in the beginning and that there was a need to start from scratch, even if their feelings and perceptions about America and moving were positive. Many participants also stated that if they had received assistance in the beginning with starting a new life in America upon moving from their home land, their transition would not have been as difficult. Participant 14 stated “I feel good about moving although it is challenging.” Participant 15 stated *اكييد..اي شخص جديد محتاج مساعده عشان يفهم الحياه هنا* [yes new person needs help to understand life here]”, and Participant 18 stated “Yes; help putting you in the right track in general.i.e. Help in steps to certified your degrees, help to teach you searching for jobs in the right way....” These quotes are consistent with the literature about the common disruptions that immigrants face upon moving to a new country, and also allows for an OTP to determine ways to collaborate with this population.

Positive Feelings about American Life and Culture

Moving from another country, especially one where the culture has stark differences compared to America, usually results in cultural shock for many immigrants. However, not all immigrants found the cultural shock to be a negative experience, and many participants found the move to be beneficial and positive. Participant 6 stated “I like the usa [*sic*] better than Egypt”. Participant 5 simply responded with the quote “feeling safe” in their response, which is

likely due to the fact that the Coptic people are oppressed in Egypt, and moving to a place like America allows for full freedom to complete meaningful occupations without oppression.

Negative Feelings about American Life and Culture

While the majority (14) of the participants recorded positive feelings about moving to America and about American culture in general, a common theme that emerged from other participants was that the move was a negative experience. A subtheme that emerged from the data was the concept of freedom, and how having too much freedom is a virtue that is in direct contrast with Coptic values. Egyptian culture is much more reserved as far as what is acceptable among the common people. Participant 8 stated "هنا لا أعاني مما أعاني ... [...I do not suffer from what I suffer here]". Participant 8 stated "I dislike over freedom which contravene [*sic*] my culture and religion." These results indicate that they were suffering in America in a different way than they did in Egypt, and many stated that having too much freedom was a negative part of the American experience.

Socialization Affected Negatively with Peers Still in Egypt

Most participants have clearly stated that their social participation with peers in Egypt has been affected for the worse, and many participants have chosen to leave the question about socializing with peers in America blank. This suggests how much Coptic immigrants have strong ties to their home country and how much relevancy their peers in Egypt still have over their lives in America. 12 out of 18 participants stated that their participation with peers in Egypt had been affected for the worse due to the time difference between the countries and due to no time to socialize here in America. Participant 13 stated "life in US tend to be more practical, it is really difficult to have time to socialize and some times it is even harder to find the

people who are good match for you to socialize with.” Participant 4 stated “تأثير سلبي كبير علي كل “العلاقات العائلية والاجتماعية” [the move was a major negative impact on all family and social relationships]. From the literature review conducted prior to disseminating the survey, social participation was the most common occupation disrupted among immigrants; these quotes are consistent with the literature review.

Religious Participation Affected for the Worse

Many participants stated that their religious participation has been affected negatively due to the move, due to language barriers, no transportation, and the sense that churches in America are not as spiritual as Egypt. Some participants also discussed the effect of COVID-19 on religious participation; starting March 2020, the pandemic caused all large, in person gatherings to be either cancelled or conducted on online platforms such as Zoom. A response about this disruption from Participant 13 was “I would say yes, time has become very tight to participate. Also, churches here are not as spiritual as in Egypt.” Participant 14 that stated “yes, it's been affected again because the of the lack of time and how demanding work is here in the states. In Egypt i gave [*sic*] been participating more in services and Liturgies.” The Coptic population in particular often relies on religious participation in coping with mental and physical illness; these quotes support the literature review in that Middle Eastern immigrants hold religious participation in high regard.

Achieving Balance Between Acculturation and Enculturation

The majority of participants stated the need to adapt to American culture, but only adapting to a degree because of the need to keep their Egyptian culture. Participant 10 stated “I enjoy [American culture] and try to be more like it- Only the good things at least (mostly what fits the Egyptian culture but with an open mind).” Participant 2 stated “[American culture is]

Good but off course with keeping someone of good Egypt habits in our minds”. These quotes suggest integration for Coptic people in America occurs across a variety of domains including language, behavioral preferences, and cultural identification, which is the common immigrant experience of integration in a new country according to the literature.

Discussion

This qualitative research study was designed to answer the research question: what is the current state of occupational engagement for recently immigrated Coptic Christian immigrants? All 18 participants clearly stated occupations that were disrupted upon moving, and after analysis themes emerged in the data that contributed to disruption in completing those meaningful occupations. The results of this research study aligned with the literature review conducted on the immigrant experience, and the themes and occupations that the participants stated were disrupted upon immigrating were also commonly reported in the literature regarding the immigrant experience. It is worth noting that many participants stated that COVID-19 has greatly affected their ability to partake in meaningful occupations, and conducting this study without the impact of the pandemic may have resulted in different results.

Limitations

Limitations of this study include the small sample size of 18 participants and the COVID-19 mandates implemented at the time of conducting this study. International travel was restricted between the USA and Egypt and did not allow for immigrants to come to America throughout the spring of 2021. All church services that were currently in place to service immigrants that have come before the pandemic have shifted to online platforms such as Zoom to allow for social distancing measures, which has deferred participants to be willing to participate in services provided.

Implications for OT Practice

The role of OT with immigrant populations has been previously researched, but not extensively (Mondaca & Josephsson, 2013; Silva & Thorén-Jönsson, 2015). Understanding that each client from a Coptic background is unique with a wide array of client factors, performance patterns and skills, environmental factors, and personalities will allow the OTP to adapt, modify, create, establish, and/or restore interventions appropriately that are occupation and activity based, therapeutic, and beneficial to a population that is in need of services. Occupational therapy-based interventions are different compared to other psychosocial disciplines; the therapy is more action-based and empowers clients via activities and participation in meaningful occupation (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2016).

In the literature review conducted prior to disseminating survey questions, OTPs that have previously worked with immigrants most commonly utilized group therapy as an intervention approach to improve occupational disruption. Given the nature of the Coptic people and the background of occupational therapy with mental health, group sessions would be the best approach to facilitate change and promote independence in the population to combat occupational disruption. The majority of research articles state the positive effects of occupational therapy group-based interventions on enhancing occupational performance among immigrants (Mondaca & Josephsson, 2013; Al Hwayan, 2020; Darawsheh, 2019). Research also has shown that Coptic immigrants in particular often feel lonely moving away from Egypt, and that social connections with peers make a tremendous difference in emotional stability; having peers to connect to in a group setting would possibly enhance their social connections (Hichy et al., 2006; Awad, 2010). Furthermore, freedom of religious expression is not as easily accessible for the Christian community, and for religiously identified groups, faith-based institutions play a

key role in sustaining heritage culture and providing contexts for integration (Moradi & Hassan, 2004; Milliken, 2020). Many immigrants that identify as religious consider spiritual and religious expression as a major part of their lifestyle, and that they strongly prefer spirituality to be addressed in the same way that physical and mental health is addressed (Thompson et al., 2018; Malone & Dadswell, 2018; Jones et al., 2016). This results from participant responses offer further evidence of these claims made from previous research studies. Practical examples that OTPs could use to improve occupational engagement with the Coptic population include to host a night of prayer for clients in a mutual language (Arabic, Coptic, or English) in a client's home, hosting a workshop that assists with finding employment, hosting financial literacy workshops, and educating on adaptive strategies and general lifestyle of American culture. Future studies should look at the impact of conducting occupation based groups on occupational engagement among Coptic Orthodox immigrants based on the occupational areas identified by the participant. Future studies should also look into occupational impacts among immigrants outside of the restraints of the pandemic. If OTPs choose to implement the approach of group-based therapy clinically, they need to carefully document treatment content, client responses to the treatment, and changes in client functioning (or occupational engagement) from start to termination of treatment. Similar interventions with minority groups may have potential to facilitate benefits if larger studies show similar results.

Conclusions

This qualitative research study aimed to explore the current state of occupational engagement among recently immigrated Coptic orthodox immigrants. The role of OT with immigrant groups has not been extensively researched, and the results from this survey are necessary to expand the horizon of OT practice in non-traditional settings. Seven themes

emerged from the qualitative data. The implications for occupational therapy practice included to incorporate group therapy while intervention planning, to utilize therapeutic use of self while practicing, and to understand the Coptic background to fully make a difference within the population.

Funding Statement

This research did not receive specific funding, but was performed as part of the entry level doctoral capstone experience of the primary investigator and the employment of the co-investigators as faculty.

Disclosure Statement

The authors declare that there are no competing interests to declare.

Data Availability

Data from this study will be available if emailed to author Sherry Manoly at s.manoly@usa.edu.

Acknowledgements

I thank my Coptic church, the church that was, is, and forever will be my home, for grounding me and giving me a passion. I thank my parents, who moved from another country, away from their families and friends, to another country that was a world's difference, and still managed to establish a great life for our family. Lastly, I thank the doctoral coordinators at the [university name], and my mentor for continued guidance and support.

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