

# Risk perception and acceptance among Latino immigrant workers

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In their review of risk perception research, Rohrman and Renn (2000) identified magnitude of risk and risk acceptance as the two core variables common to all models of risk perception. Magnitude of risk refers to the evaluation of how hazardous a given situation is. Risk acceptance refers to the willingness to accept a given risk, independent of the perceived magnitude of that risk. Researchers have found that ratings of risk magnitude can vary significantly from country to country (Rohrman, 2000). Researchers have concluded that “cultural factors are crucial for people’s risk evaluation” (Rohrman & Renn, 2000, p. 17). Most risk perception models hold that in addition to one’s culture, one’s personal history can significantly impact evaluations of risk (Rohrman & Renn, 2000). Many Latino immigrant workers are exposed to significant risks (illegal border crossings, desert conditions, exploitation by human smugglers) in their efforts to enter the U.S. Once in the U.S., many are under constant threat of deportation. In addition, they frequently live in the most dangerous parts of urban areas. Taken together, this history has the potential to “numb” Latino immigrants to risk. Consequently, Latino immigrant workers may be more likely than American-born workers to underestimate the danger of workplace hazards.

A number of factors impact judgments of risk acceptability (Rohrman & Renn, 2000). Important among these are benefit aspects of the risk: what benefits are provided by the risk source to the individual, what is the relevance of the risk to societal and/or individual human needs, and the equitability of the risks v. benefits. There are also significant cultural differences in risk acceptance (Rohrman, 2000). Latino immigrant workers may have a number of factors which would contribute to a willingness to accept a higher level of risk than American-born workers. The most obvious of these factors is their illegal immigration status which severely limits their employment opportunities. Feeling vulnerable to threats of deportation, dismissal without cause and blacklisting, many immigrant workers are afraid to bring concerns about workplace safety to the attention of their supervisors (Walter et al, 2002; CPWR, 2004). Some Latino immigrant workers report that the basis of their attractiveness to American employers is that Latinos “work hard” and “don’t complain” (O’Connor, Gildner & Easter, 2000). Some Latino immigrant workers realize that they are working in more hazardous conditions than American workers, but accept the situation because it is no worse than what they experienced in their home countries. A number of studies have found that some Latino immigrant workers feel they have no control over workplace safety and they can only accept the dangers there (Vaughn, 1993a, 1993b; Grieshop, Stiles & Villanueva, 1996). This is congruent with the personality trait of fatalismo that some have attributed to Latinos (Cuellar, Arnold & Gonzalez, 1995; Antshel, 2002). Fatalismo (fatalism) refers to the extent that individuals believe that their destinies are beyond their control. Antsel (2002) reviewed research that suggested that Latinos are more likely than non-Latinos to believe that negative life events are determined by God and therefore must be accepted and endured.

## Method

NIOSH has recently completed data collection with a total of 600 workers. This sample was stratified by nativity (400 Latino immigrants and 200 American-born workers), gender (300 male and 300 female) and location (Cincinnati, Ohio, a new settlement area, and half from Santa Fe, New Mexico, an old settlement area). In addition, the Latino immigrant sample was stratified by time in the United States (= 2 years or = 5 years). Among the items included on this question was a section of 20 items intended to assess risk perception and risk acceptance. Comparisons will be made between the study groups using one-way ANOVAs and t-tests.

## Implications

This study empirically tests a great deal of speculation in the literature based upon qualitative data and/or theory. If the expected group differences are found, it not only lends credence to this literature, but also suggests ways in which occupational safety and health interventions might be tailored for the Latino immigrant population. If the expected group differences are not found, it has the potential to completely reset the consensus opinion and/or conventional wisdom among the content area experts in this area.

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