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## **MOURNING THE HOMELAND, SETTLING IN PLACE**

### **Understanding the challenges immigrants face in the Hudson Valley of New York State**

**Presenter:** *Maria Elena Ferrer-Harrington*  
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**Date:** *Oct. 12/2017*

**Location:** *Rathaus Pankow, Breitestr. 24A – 26, 13187, Berlin*

Immigrant families live difficult lives as they adjust to new communities and new cultures. These challenges can affect their mental and physical health. But the difficulties multiply when the new country's healthcare services and educational system differ greatly from those of the immigrants' original homeland, and the work environment and living conditions are poor. Emotional isolation, prejudice and general feelings of disorientation due to the unfamiliar new ways of life also shape immigrants' ability to remain healthy and respond to illness.

This presentation will explore some attitudes about, and perceptions of, these issues among Hispanic immigrants to New York's Hudson Valley region, north of New York City, focusing on their search for support services, to understand their experiences and to identify opportunities for improving services delivery.

One framework used in our work is migratory mourning, the suffering of immigrants as they become separated and experience losses of family, culture, language, land, social status, ethnicity and other changes associated with migration. Conversations about migration are often limited to its demographic and economic effects, disregarding the psychosocial and other human aspects. "It is vital to recognize the complex reality immigrants face," says migratory mourning expert Joseba Achotegui, M.D., Ph.D. "There is a tendency to devalue the human aspects of migration because they cannot be standardized on graphs, tables or algorithms."

An additional framework is the concept of place, understood as the intersection of the physical environment and mutually interactive social forces reflected in the neighborhoods, buildings, landscapes and service environments of community life. For immigrants, place provides the means for integrating the memory of the homeland and the discovery of the hostland. Professor of Philosophy Edward Casey of Stony Brook University writes: "An alert and alive memory connects spontaneously with place, finding in it features that favor and parallel its own activities. We might even say that memory is naturally place-oriented or at least place-supported."

These perspectives, incorporating the social determinants of health, create a complementary and stimulating approach that is practical for building cultural sensitivity and awareness in healthcare delivery, community services, and social and psychological provisions for immigrants. Places shape people and people shape places.