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## Social Capital in Rural Southwest Kansas

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### Abstract

This study addresses a social capital literature that has targeted a White majority in the United States. Hispanic/Latino audiences, especially new immigrant populations, have not been primary subjects in most studies. Information about the social connectedness of minorities has come from secondary sources. The goal of this study was to understand how Hispanics/Latinos compare to Anglo, families in rural Kansas, to different levels of social capital. This comparison also looked into the differences of social connectedness and community involvement. The study was done in English and Spanish in order to reach the under-represented population.

According to political scientist Robert Putnam (2000), it is through experiences of face-to-face interaction with those from different backgrounds, that people learn to trust each other. Connections create networks that allow social trust to spread throughout society. At the individual level, there has been strong, consistent evidence that social connectedness has positive effects. Individuals have the capacity and the choice to build their social connectedness and community engagement. Those assets can be shared with the collective family, organization, community, state, or country. When individuals have access to networks of supportive and accepting associates, it can generate an array of personal and societal benefits that include preventing or overcoming illness, improving health, supporting child development, mitigating poverty, addressing racial inequalities, preventing crime, and addressing other social concerns. When one builds a stock of personal relationships and other social connections from which he or she can call upon in times of need, it is called social capital.

This study, in part, assessed social connectedness and community engagement of people in Kearny County, a rural location in Southwest Kansas that has a 30% Hispanic/Latino population. Surveys were sent to selected households in English and Spanish, and two small focus groups were conducted in the two languages. Statistical analyses indicated support for the hypothesis that Spanish-speaking populations build and maintain social connections and are engaged in community. The independent variables including gender, age, race/ethnicity, education, income, and community durability, were analyzed with dependent variables made of scaled items to measure social connectedness and community engagement. Race/ethnicity, education, and income appeared to be the strongest predictors of social connectedness and community engagement. Implications of the results are discussed.

*Keywords:* social connectedness, minorities, Hispanic population, community engagement

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## Statement of Problem

In looking at social capital among low-income families, McBride, Sherraden, and Pritzker noted that varying types of community involvement are means for developing skills and a capacity for “increasing tolerance among people, building society, supporting collective action for greater well-being, and strengthening autonomy” (2006, p. 152). Robert Putnam (2000) regarded one’s associations (connections) as the prime sources of social trust and bridging inter-connected social networks and also contributed to community engagement. Daily face-to-face interactions are able to transcend sub-cultural barriers whether they are cultures of: 1) economies; 2) ethnicities; 3) political ideologies; 4) social groups; or 5) other sub-group cultures that exist within societies. The lack of social inter-connectedness could contribute to unemployment, poor education, and poor health, and socio-economic status.

Recent immigrant Hispanic/Latino populations, over the past 25 years, have been especially vulnerable to individuals that lack important inter-connected networks as they struggle with language barriers, acculturation, and income challenges (Parra-Cardona, Bullock, Imig, Villarreal, & Gold, 2006). Many of the rural-bound are Hispanic/Latino immigrants (Allensworth & Rochín, 1996). Rodney Hero (2007) said that Hispanic/Latinos do not measure up to White populations in terms of social capital outcomes because survey instruments

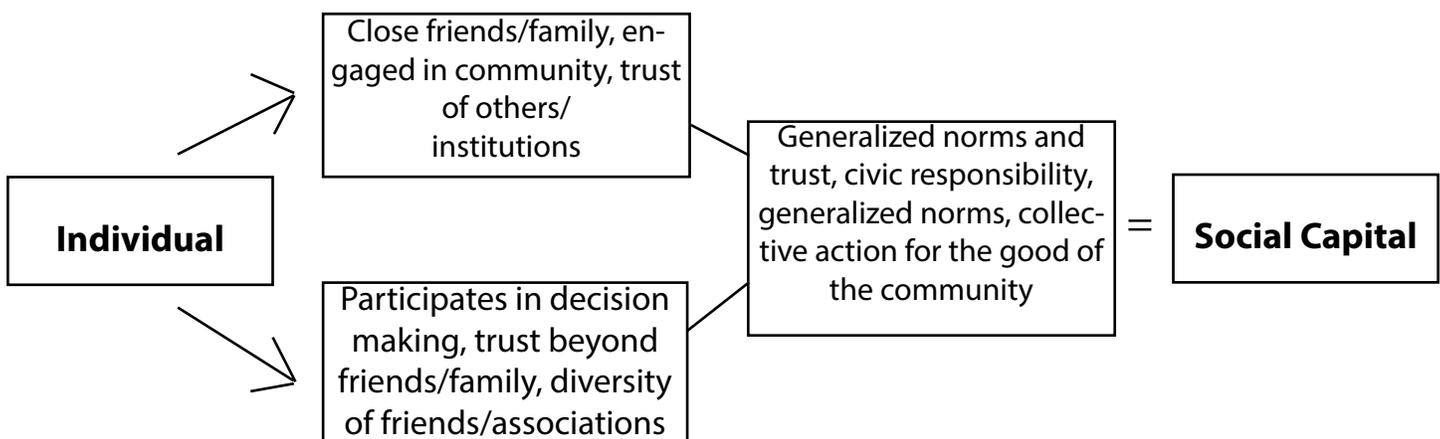
do not measure specific types of social connections, especially important to a culture building new living places in new lands.

A 2007, a Kansas study undertaken by Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health and Wake Forest University School of Medicine, did not reach much of Garden City’s 48% Hispanic/Latino population. In the final report, Garden City, a heterogeneous community, was listed as having the lowest social capital scores, and as a homogenous community, scored the highest in terms of social capital indicators. The Kearny County study was seen as the foundation to looking at other counties in Southwest Kansas that had not been previously studied, but were also major receiving areas for Hispanic/Latino immigrants.

## Social Capital

The figure below illustrates a schematic model of social capital theory based on literature and personal observations. Social capital begins with the individual. If that individual possesses respectful relationships, trusts others, and participates in the life of the community, then those possessions are passed along to the community. A community with well-connected residents is characterized by: 1) generalized norms; 2) trust; 3) people who practice civic responsibility; and 4) demonstrate collective action for the good of the community.

**Figure 1. Path analyses demonstrating associations between acculturative stress, depressive symptoms, deviant peer affiliations, and prosocial behaviors.**



## **Hispanic/Latino Communities in Southwest Kansas**

The changing demographics of Southwest Kansas are a result of immigration related to the availability of less skilled jobs required, in agriculture and lack of economic opportunity in Mexico and Central America. The most recent heavy migration to Southwest Kansas began in the early 1980's because of Meat packing plants. Tyson Meats has been recruiting from Mexico and Central America, looking for people willing to work at lower-paying jobs. Finney County and its neighboring counties, such as Kearny County, have steadily growing populations of immigrants because of Meat packing and other agricultural jobs (Stull & Broadway, 2004).

### **Bonding Social Capital**

Putnam (2000a) distinguished societal connections as bonding and bridging social capital. Bonding social capital are those ties based around family, close friends, and other near-kin, which is inward looking (takes care of its own) and binds together people from similar sociological positions. A way to interpret Putnam's (2000a) theories is to see bonding networks as a circle of disconnected cells. People inside each cell continuously connect with each other and often do not make connections with others outside the boundary of the cell. Players in bonded relationships have similar beliefs and live in similar lifestyles and there is no sharing of information outside of the bonded relationships. In the rural areas of the U.S., Mexican immigrants exhibited robust intra-group and extended family ties (Sarkisian, Gerena, & Gerstel, 2006). Bonding social capital, or homophily, is a sociological phenomenon when people are more likely to form friends with others who are similar in race/ethnicity, social class, education, age, etc. (Flora, Flora, & Fey, 2004).

### **Bridging Social Capital**

Bridging social capital links people from one close-knit group to other groups outside the imme-

diated bonds. Bridging from one group to another tends to generate broad and inter-connected circles (Putnam, 2000). A venn diagram might describe bridging social capital with its three overlapping circles. When the circles intersect, that illustrates bridging where new information is shared and new ideas are formed, clearly showing how bridging could occur.

### **Social Capital in Hispanic/Latino Communities**

Nadia Flores (2006) noted that solidarity in relationships is prevalent among Mexican rural dwellers and those in Hispanic/Latino populations emigrating from urban to rural settings (Flores, 2006). That solidarity also enforces social norms. Siles, Robison, Cuéllar, Garcia, & LaHousse (2006) showed that Latino immigrants in Michigan use their social capital, mostly bonding, during the entire process of emigrating from their countries of origin to the U.S.

“If immigrants did not have social connections, they would not make it to the receiving community in the first place,” said Anthropologist, Donald Stull (personal communication, February 27, 2011).

### **Demographics of Kearny County**

The 2010 Census showed Kearny County with a population of 4,169 residents. Kearny County has a Hispanic/Latino population of 30.7%. The State of Kansas averages a Hispanic/Latino population of 9.3%. Foreign-born individuals in Kearny County comprise 12.7% while Kansas, as a whole, is 5%. Twenty-two percent speak a language other than English in Kearney County and the state of Kansas averages 8.7%.

### **Sources of Data**

In total, 266 surveys were mailed, 52 were returned through the postal service (41 English and 11 Spanish). Eighteen Spanish surveys came from nutrition classrooms, six from the local carniciera and

15 English surveys came from the Kearny County Extension Office. Five women were interviewed in two small focus groups as well. The total sample was 91 completed surveys and five interviews/focus groups. This data represented 2.4% of Kearny County's total population.

### **Measures**

The questions that were asked in the survey and interviews reflected the dimensions of social capital (Easterling et al., 2007; Putnam, 2000b) and measured social connectedness and community engagement. The community engagement scales looked at involvement in secular and faith-based groups, participation in organized activities, and volunteering/giving (Easterling et al., 2007; Putnam, 2000b). The predictor variables were: 1) age; 2) gender; 3) race/ethnicity; 4) education; 5) income; and 6) years lived in the community.

### **Race/Ethnicity**

Race/ethnicity appeared to have the most statistically significant relationships to each of the dependent variables: BRIDGECAP3, BONDCAP3, Trust, CHURCHR3, and DONATE3. The percentages showed that Hispanic/Latinos had medium levels of bridging and bonding social connections. Those constructs were measured by the amount of social connections and community activities that individuals participated in. The Hispanic/Latino population in Kearny County appeared to be more settled into their communities. There did not appear to be vast differences among White and Hispanic/Latino respondents regarding bridging, bonding, trust, and donating. The greatest difference in levels of bridging social capital was church attendance. Hispanic and Latinos were 53% more likely to attend church than Whites. The regression analysis showed a trend toward significance and moderate strength in the relationship when race/ethnicity was tested with BONDCAP3. The qualitative interviews supported the idea that close friends and family are essential to successfully surviving in newly developing popula-

tions of immigrants. Minorities who reported lower social connections and community engagement from other studies are not being asked culturally appropriate questions in surveys.

### **Gender**

The cross-tabulations with gender only showed a relationship to church attendance. Women were more likely to attend church than men. More women completed the surveys, more women were single, and according to the data, women lived longer than men. The strength of the gender/church attendance relationship was supported by the regression analysis that showed a moderate relationship ( $b = .41, p < .001$ ).

### **Age**

Age was not a predictor of bridging, bonding, trust, or church attendance in terms of relationships of chi-squared, Pearson's or Spearman's tests. Regressions showed moderate strength and some linearity. Respondents in the 36-45 year old age range were more likely to donate and more likely to trust, as revealed by percentages. People in the 36-45 age range reported higher social connections and community engagement than those in the 46-55 year old age range. Qualitative interviews indicated that donating to churches and schools fit the patterns of young families. Giving, in respect to the community, tapered off as age increased.

### **Education**

The Kearny County study showed that educational attainment was related to bridging and bonding social capital. Percentages showed that people with some high school and some college were more likely to have social contacts and be engaged in community activities compared to those with college and graduate degrees. The data supported people with lower education as having more social connections and being more engaged in the community. The qualitative interviews revealed that social connectedness was not necessarily correlated to education.

Four of the five women had either less than eighth-grade education (2) or a high school diploma (2). Each woman was actively engaged in the respective community. Respondents with a high school degree or only some college were more likely to donate money compared to those with college or graduate degrees.

### **Income**

Chi-squared tests proved a relationship between income and BRIDGECAP3, TRUST, and DONATE3. The regression analysis showed a strong relationship ( $b = .483$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and some linearity between income and donating. Respondents with lower income were more likely to donate to institutions than those with higher income. The percentages also showed that respondents with lower income had relatively high bonding and bridging social capital.

### **Years Lived in the Community**

The length of years that respondents lived in Kearny County was related to donating money to institutions in chi-squared tests.

### **Qualitative**

All five of the interview respondents were from Mexico and had been living in the United States from 2.5 years to more than 15 years. The most common form of community involvement was participation in church and its weekly activities. Each outlined schedules of volunteering for schools, churches and for helping one another. Each respondent noted a belief that most people can be trusted, though they asserted, "It's hard to say that when I know that many people here in the United States do not trust us and do not want us here. The respondents often repeated their views of the importance of seeing people every day. Staying close to one another is important for survival in moral support of being and in a new country. Settling immediate family, while still carrying concerns for family members living in foreign countries such as Mexico, was also important.

### **Implications for Practice and Research**

Hero (2007) suggested that if researchers studied social connections and civic engagement more appropriate to Hispanic/Latino immigrant cultures (close families, close friends, religiosity, and community involvement, like volunteering in the schools), there would be a more accurate picture of Hispanic/Latino social capital. Perhaps researchers could go into targeted communities to spend time with subjects. In Kearny County, the mainstream literature referred to as social capital (social interactions, and community engagement), looked different when new immigrants were involved. Policy makers need to see that Hispanic/Latino immigrant populations want better lives for their families. A barrier to cultural, financial, educational, and societal success is the misunderstanding of one another. Policy makers should not make decisions based on fear. Therefore, reactive decisions would not become laws. Southwest Kansas' growing Hispanic/Latino populations add rich cultural and economic value to society.

### **Conclusion**

Individuals of Hispanic/Latino origin will continue to migrate to rural communities because of the opportunities of less skilled jobs. Meat packing plants have purposely placed themselves in rural America because it puts them closer to the product sources (feedlots), and decreases cost to the company (Stull & Broadway, 2004). This work did shed some light on how new populations acquire and use their social connections. This could offer insights to extension educators, sociologists, teachers and home-visitors. Future researchers work with Hispanic/Latino populations to find ways towards understanding how families form social connections and become involved in community. It was a good way to put a face on families who are confronted with discrimination and marginalization because they are "different".

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