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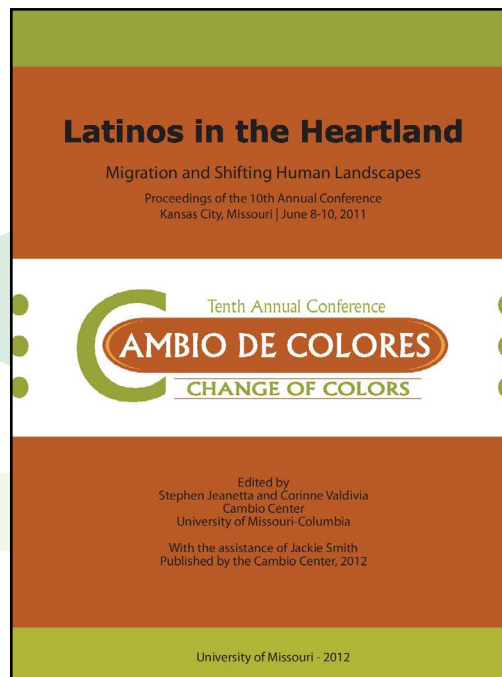
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**Porous Spheres: Direct Observation of Interethnic Interaction in a Small  
Midwestern Community**

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## ► Porous Spheres: Direct Observation of Interethnic Interaction in a Small Midwestern Community

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### Abstract

Indications of community integration in rural communities, where there has been a large increase of immigrants, are largely based on survey and interview responses of community members. However, as an anthropologist, I know that there is often a difference between what people say they (or others) do and what they actually do. In my research I relied on the direct observation of people interacting (or not) in public places in a small Midwestern community with a sizeable Latino population. This study suggests that multiple methodologies are necessary for understanding the complex social interactions and levels of community integration in these places.

### Introduction

The community where this research took place has experienced rapid growth in the number of Latino residents since the early 1990's after the construction of a meat-processing plant. According to the 2010 Census, the town is currently almost 50% Latino. Immigrants also live in the surrounding county but to a lesser extent. County wide, the population is almost 20% Latino. These immigrants come predominately from Mexico but also other Central American countries such as Guatemala and El Salvador, as well as other parts of the United States, and the world. While the majority of the remaining residents are white, there are also small numbers of African Americans, Native Americans, Asians and others. While the total population of the county grew between 1990 and 2000, between 2000 and 2010 the population declined slightly (U.S. Census, 2010).

Rural communities in the Midwest that have experienced increased population growth, due to immigrants coming to work in meat-processing plants, have been the subject of many studies (Stull et al, 1995; Grey, 1999; Grey and Woodrick, 2002; Culver, 2004; Stull and Broadway, 2004; Broadway & Stull, 2006). Research has been conducted within a variety of disciplines using a variety of methods to answer myriad research questions. These studies focus on understanding how immigrants are settling into these communities economically, politically and socially. One facet of this process that has received less attention is inter-group contact between Latinos and whites, which is required for full integration into the social institutions of the receiving community (Welch & Sigelman, 2000). This study examines public interethnic social interactions in one town in the rural Midwest as an indicator of social integration.

For the purpose of this research, social interaction is defined as occurring when two or more individuals come into contact with one another in a public space. These interactions can be brief or

prolonged. The purpose of this research was to document whether or not these interactions occurred not to determine the quality of these encounters. Note that social contact does not necessarily affect an individual's opinion of another ethnic or racial group (Welch & Sigelman, 2000). However, it is from these types of interactions that social ties can be created whether of the bonding or bridging type (Putnam, 2000). Positive interactions between individuals produce a greater chance of forming a social bond (McMillan & George, 1986). It is often from interacting with others and participating in local events that immigrants come to feel part of the community (Chavez, 1994).

## Methods

In this study, direct observation was used to measure the degree of social interaction between Latinos and non-Latinos. Direct observation is a form of naturalistic inquiry used in many disciplines (Bernard, 2002; McCall, 1984). Individuals were observed in various venues throughout town where interactions were likely to occur. These venues were all places generally available to the public including parks, sidewalks, streets, school grounds, businesses and religious institutions. Observations were scheduled at various times of the day and days of the week at each location, to maximize the chance of observing a range of interactions. The sample was purposive, not random, and results cannot be extrapolated to the community as a whole or to other communities.

There are advantages and disadvantages to using direct observation. The method is unobtrusive so people are unlikely to change their behavior because they generally do not know they are being observed. In addition, since behavior was observed directly, informant accuracy was not an issue. At the same time because individuals were not interviewed, an individual's perception of the nature of the encounter and their reaction to it cannot be obtained. In addition, how individuals behave in public may not be the same as how they behave in private (Amato, 1989). Other studies have obtained information on immigrants' perceptions of their experiences in these communities by talking to them and through participant observation. The value of this research is that it uses a method that has not been used before (to the best of the author's knowledge) to examine the public interethnic social interactions in a rural Midwestern community with a significant immigrant population.

Data was intermittently recorded over an eight month period between October 2009 and May 2010. More than 150 hours were spent observing. Observation notes were recorded using a digital voice recorder. The notes were then transcribed and loaded into NVivo. Using NVivo the notes were coded and then analyzed.

### *Data:*

In total, white and Latino persons were observed approximately the same number of times. In total 560 observations of Latinos and 568 observations of whites were recorded. These observations included individuals, groups of individuals and individuals interacting with one another. Observations of Latinos included more of males (430) than of females (329). There were also more observations of white males than of white females, although the difference was smaller (365 observations of white males and 351 of white females). While there were more observations of whites overall, more Latino individuals were observed. One individual may have been observed on more than one occasion and these numbers do not represent unique cases. One observation may contain many individuals and individual totals will not add up to category totals. In addition to gender, the age of individuals was recorded and totaled as well.

The age of individuals was approximated using a three-part coding strategy. Individuals who were estimated to be 18 or younger were coded as *young*. Individuals who appeared to be of an age that they could potentially be out of the work force (whether they were or not), were coded as *older*. The largest age group consisted of everyone between these two groups. Those individuals who appeared to be between 18 and 65 were coded as *in the middle*.

The number of observations of individuals in each of the three age categories was recorded. For Latinos, the smallest age group observed was *older* males (17 observations or four percent) and older females (22 observations or seven percent). Among whites, observations of *older* individuals were least

frequent as well (52 or 15% for white females and 71 or 20% for white males). Among Latinos, the second largest age group observed were the *young* (213 observations of females and 239 of males), followed by those *in the middle* (161 observations of females and 222 for males). For whites, while the trend among males remained the same, slightly more observations of *young* males (171) compared to males *in the middle* (168) were made. The trend reversed for white females. There were more observations of white females *in the middle* (183) compared to the *young* category (173).

When individuals were not alone (but not just coming into contact with one another), they were coded as either being *together* (two persons) or in a *group* (more than two persons). In each of these categories the individuals involved were more likely to be of the same ethnicity than of a different ethnicity. The category *together* was used 441 times in this research, most frequently to describe Latinos (216), then whites (193). Whites and Latinos were observed as *together* 32 times or in about seven percent of the cases, in which the code was used. Groups of individuals were observed less frequently but the trend described above was the same. Groups were predominately homogenous including 41 observations of groups consisting entirely of Latinos and 32 observations of groups consisting entirely of whites. There were 11 observations (13% of the total number of groups) of interethnic groups, consisting of both Latinos and whites.

### *Social Interaction:*

Individuals who were observed coming into contact with one another were coded as being involved in an *interaction*. Interactions between Latinos and between Latinos and whites were observed. Interactions between Latinos were observed 77 times while interactions between Latinos and whites were observed 73 times. Therefore, there was little difference in the number of public social interactions Latinos had with other Latinos compared to the number of social interactions observed between Latinos and whites.

At times during the research, Latinos and whites came into proximity with one another but no interaction occurred. This is described with the category *non-interaction* and includes those instances that interaction might have occurred, but did not. In all, 25 instances of *non-interaction* were recorded. Therefore, of the total number of possible interactions observed between Latinos and whites, 74% resulted in an *interaction* of some type while 26% resulted in *non-interaction*.

Interactions between Latinos and whites occurred in many different places and among many segments of the population. The most common place where interactions occurred between Latinos and whites was on the Square. After the Square, interactions occurred most frequently in local businesses including white-owned businesses as well as Latino-owned businesses and in proximity to the school. Interactions occurred, but less frequently, in other parts of town such as the library, park and in church.

The age and gender of individuals involved in interethnic social interactions varied. The most common interactions were among individuals in the category *young*. Among Latinos, *young* males were slightly more likely to be involved in interactions with whites than Latino females. Among *young* whites, the reverse was true. Interactions involving individuals *in the middle* age group also occurred. Latino males and females were observed interacting with whites at the same rate while white females in this age group were observed interacting with Latinos more than twice as much as white males *in the middle* age category. Individuals in the age category *older* were observed in interactions least frequently, with white females being observed interacting with Latinos more than white males in this category. The trend is the same with Latino females in this age category who were observed interacting inter-ethnically more often than Latino males.

## **Conclusions**

This research used direct observations to document interethnic social interactions occurring in a small town in the Midwest with a significant immigrant population. While interethnic interactions occurred among all age groups, individuals in the *young* age category were more likely to interact with an individual of another ethnicity than individuals in either *in the middle* or *older* age categories. In terms of gender, the picture was less clear. Among Latinos, males were more likely to be involved in interactions than females.

Among whites, females were more likely to participate in interactions than males. The greatest number of observations of interethnic interactions (including those between employees and customers) occurred on the Square, in areas around the school and in local businesses. While social interactions do not necessarily lead to having a more positive view point of another ethnic group, they are often the first rung in the ladder of social integration, which can benefit immigrants and non-immigrants alike (Cattell et al, 2007; Putnam, 2000). Research such as this is an important step in documenting that this process is occurring. Additional research is needed to understand what these social interactions might mean and to uncover additional indicators of social interaction.

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## ► The Policy Dimensions of the Context of Reception for Immigrants (and Latinos) in the Midwest

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### Abstract

Latino/as comprise approximately 16.1% of the nation's population (Grieco, 2010). Approximately 37.2% of Latino/as are foreign-born, comprising approximately 6.0% of the nation's population. Nationally, the number of Latinos/as living in the United States grew by 37% since the year 2000. A robust component of that growth was immigration. Immigration to the United States is not a new phenomenon; however, recent waves differ from previous immigrant influxes in significant ways. Immigrants are now coming predominantly from Latin American and Asian countries (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996; Singer 2002); and, they are no longer moving to and staying in the traditional gateway cities or states (Cadge et al., 2008). For example, the geographical distribution of Latino immigrants now include towns and cities of