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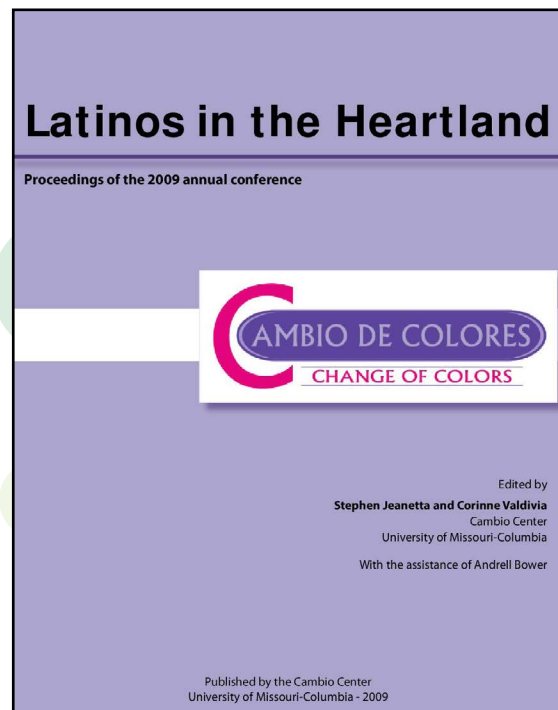
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Perceptions of Community Climate Among Latino Immigrants in Three Rural
Communities in the Midwest

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Abstract

The current study is part of a large-scale project that is examining the strategies that newcomers use to accumulate assets, minimize vulnerabilities, and to integrate into their communities. Using focus group data, this presentation will focus on the context of reception experienced by these newcomers in the communities where they settled. Participants were Latino adults (n = 50; 24 men, 26 women) who resided in one of three rural communities in different areas of the state. Focus groups interviews in Spanish were conducted with males and females separately in each community. The presentation will describe the following themes: perceptions of the community climate and experiences with racism. The appeal of the host community and the community reception will be described, and participants' experiences with overt and covert racism will be highlighted. Implication of the findings for interventions and improving the context of reception for newcomers will be discussed.

Keywords: Latino immigration, rural immigrants, changing rural communities

Introduction

The next four papers are derived from a study that began in 2006 of three rural Midwestern communities. The goals of the research are:

- To develop a better understanding of the newcomers' integration process with a focus on the assets and resources they bring with them
- To document factors that impede or facilitate integration
- To inform decision makers about policies that can contribute to positive community development that begins to recognize the opportunities and address the challenges of community integration

The project has focused primarily on the roles of identity, acculturation, social and human capital and the context of reception in the integration process. The theoretical framework for this study is the Sustainable Livelihood Strategies Model. SLSM recognizes the economic, human, cultural and social capitals individuals bring with them and incorporates the context of reception or community climate as a critical factor affecting the economic and social integration of newcomers (Valdivia, et al). An analysis of the integration process using SLSM will help identify factors that contribute to strategies conducive to newcomers' asset accumulation, reduce vulnerability to risks and explain how newcomers become part of their new communities.

Methodology

The research has two phases, a first qualitative phase to define the issues and the concepts critical to the framework, and a second quantitative phase to measure factors and outcomes of strategies. The qualitative data collection was conducted in 2006 and 2007 and included focus groups, individual case study interviews and a Photovoice project. The focus groups explored the economic and social factors that the newcomers contributed to the integration process. Seven focus groups were conducted, one for men and one for women in each of the three communities,

plus a second focus group for men in one community after low turnout due to inclement weather and a level of diversity less than what the research required. Individual interviews were a way to explore the life stories of the newcomers; 15 interviews were conducted with newcomers across the three communities. Photovoice sessions were conducted to explore the context of reception from the newcomers' perspective. Eight participants in each community took a series of photos to answer the following questions: What exists in the community that facilitates or contributes to your integration in the community? What are the barriers to your integration in the community?

Focus groups

The first two papers, "Perceptions of Community Climate among Latino Immigrants in Three Rural Communities in the Midwest" and "Developing Social Capitals: Latino Immigrants in Three Rural Communities in the Midwest," were developed from the focus group data. The purpose of the focus groups was to gain a better understanding of how newcomers were connecting to the resources they needed to survive and grow and to learn more about how newcomers gained access to health care, education, housing and employment resources. Doctoral students facilitated the focus groups and conducted them in Spanish. Each focus group was transcribed into Spanish and then translated into English.

Fifty-two Latino immigrants participated in the focus groups. Twenty-five were female and twenty-seven were male. The average age was 39.93 and the average length of stay 12.04 years. Sixty three percent were married with 2.79 children. The sample was considerably older with more time in the U.S. than the average migrant but the goal of the sampling was to examine the range of experiences. There were younger, single, newer immigrants included in the sample from each community, which better reflects the norm for newcomers.

The third paper, "Networks and Context of Reception in Accumulation Strategies of Latinos in Rural Communities of the Midwest - A Quantitative

Analysis,” develops the quantitative model, with variables constructed with the findings from the focus groups and Photovoice research. Specific variables constructed were the social and cultural capitals. They were tested with an external/community variable of context of reception, with the community climate represented by the racial profiling index. Social capital, cultural capital and human capital are measured through their regression on income earnings of native and foreign-born Latinos for three regions, tested with the Census data. Results will show how findings from the qualitative research inform the development of variables of acculturation, capitals and climate that make it possible to measure their impact on income earnings of Latinos in the Midwest.

Household survey

The development of a household survey began in 2008 and continued into 2009 using existing elements from SLSM and additional elements created for social capital, cultural capital and the context of reception developed from analysis of the qualitative data.

The fourth paper, “The Importance of Social Networks on Latino Immigrants’ Well-being in Rural Missouri,” is based on a preliminary analysis of the data currently being collected in a household survey and uses Structural Equation Model methods to assess the impact of social network use on well-being of Latinos and comparatively assess the differential impact of social networks on Latino immigrants’ wellbeing based on the type of work they have, irrespective of where they live.

References

Valdivia, C., Dannnerbeck, A., Jeanetta, S.C., Flores, L. & Martínez, D. (2007, September). Asset accumulation strategies in 3 new settlement communities. Paper presented at the congress of the Latin American Studies Association. Montréal Canada.

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► Perceptions of Community Climate among Latino Immigrants in Three Rural Communities in the Midwest

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Introduction

According to the 2000 U.S. Census Bureau, the Latino population in Missouri doubled in size between 1990 and 2000. Latino immigrants are drawn to Missouri for work opportunities in meat and poultry processing plants, and they indicate that once they arrive, they are able to locate employment easily (Flores et al., 2008). These Latino immigrants are facing a number of challenges as they adjust to the Midwest lifestyle and living in small rural communities. For years, the rural settlement communities were relatively homogenous communities with little to no racial diversity among residents. These communities are also encountering challenges they have never experienced before as they adjust to the increasing levels of diversity. To better understand how Latino immigrants in the Midwest acquire the necessary resources and skills to adapt to their new environment and to successfully integrate into these communities, it is critical to develop a good understanding of the context in which these adjustments occur. In addition to objective descriptions of the communities, an assessment of newcomers' perceptions of the community and the manner in which the community received them can provide useful information on the ease or difficulty these newcomers might face. Using qualitative methodology, the purpose of this presentation is to understand immigrants' perceptions of the community climate.

Results

The results of our focus groups suggested two general themes by which Latino newcomers' described their experiences within the community: perceptions of the community and perceptions of racism. Categories for the respective themes will be described, and representative quotes from the focus groups interviews that illustrate the category are presented below.

With regard to the first theme, perceptions of the community, two categories emerged from the data: appeal of the host community and community reception.

Appeal of the host community

Participants indicated a variety of reasons that drew them to the area, including that the community was good and safe with low crime rates and a slow place of living. Participants discussed leaving valuables unsecured and not having to worry about anyone breaking into their home or cars to take their things. The peacefulness and serenity in the rural communities was also appealing to participants, particularly those who moved from larger, urban areas. Participants felt that the community afforded a good education to their children and believed that the way of life in the Midwest provided a good environment in which to raise children. The low cost of living in these communities was a strong appeal to the Latino immigrants who felt that their earnings went further for basic living expenses.

“I’ve always lived in big cities. When I came here, I didn’t like it. I missed the city, the noise, I don’t know. I was scared by the quietness. But after a year, I saw the change in my life, in my home, with my husband, with my kids, and I learned to like it here, and now I don’t want to leave here for the same reasons of work, education, family circle and all of that.”

Community reception

Some participants indicated they felt welcomed into the community and encountered others who were willing to help them when they were in need. These participants perceived the community was friendly and receptive to their arrival. One participant indicated that, without fail, a resident would “lend a hand” if she or he struggled for the right word to say. Others described a cold and unwelcoming climate and thought some residents did not want them to stay simply because they looked, acted or spoke differently. Still, others indicated their perceptions of the community reception changed from a cold, chilly climate to one that accepted newcomers. One example included an elderly neighbor who posted signs on her property for her new neighbors to stay off her property and to not litter. The newcomer described gaining her trust over a period of time by extending help to her and delivering food.

“At the beginning, the Americans were not very accustomed to seeing another type of people. But when we began to coexist, and they saw that the people came solely for the reason of work and all that, they began to see us in a better way and there was a big difference. In the beginning, we could never involve ourselves in the community.”

For the second theme, perceived racism, the following two categories were identified: overt acts of discrimination and microaggressions, or modern racism.

Overt acts of discrimination

Participants encountered direct acts of discrimination based on their race, nationality and immigrant status. Examples of overt discrimination they experienced included being the target of housing discrimination and stereotypes, for example that they didn’t pay taxes or were on welfare. Newcomers encountered landlords who would not rent lodging to their families because, they believed, their family was too big. Another talked about a realtor who avoided certain neighborhoods because he or she wanted to keep the neighborhoods segregated. Finally, participants felt they were mistreated at work because of their status.

“They know very well that you are working like this [without documents] and this is the reason they treat you like putting you down a little. They give you the hardest jobs.”

Microaggressions

Unlike direct acts of discrimination, microaggressions are indignities and insults targeted toward persons of color on a daily basis (Sue et al., 2007). These racist acts are considered modern forms of racism because they are often covert and more difficult to identify; these forms of racism are more commonplace and acceptable today instead of the traditional overt racism. Participants indicated

being the target of four different types of racial microaggressions: alien in own land, color-blindedness, assumption of criminal status and second-class citizen. Participants described being treated as foreigners and receiving strange looks from the community residents. Some participants were asked what they were doing in the community and were told to return to their own country. Community residents also exhibited color-blind attitudes toward the newcomers when they expected the newcomers to conform to their way of life and pressured them to look, act and speak as they did. Newcomers commonly addressed language issues as barriers to integration by the newcomers, and some indicated they were told by residents to speak English or were discouraged or admonished for speaking Spanish. Some participants felt they were feared by the residents and residents did not trust them because they assumed they were all criminals. Finally, participants discussed feeling residents treated them poorly. For example, one participant indicated that a store employee attended to everyone else in the store before asking her if she needed help, and when doing so, addressed her in an annoyed tone.

Conclusions

Several efforts can be made to improve the climate of reception for Latino newcomers in rural communities in the Midwest. Because these communities have traditionally been homogenous, the infusion of racial diversity in the community might fuel tensions between newcomers and residents that stem from lack of knowledge, misinformation or faulty assumptions on both sides. Newcomers might benefit from having a safe space in which to meet with other newcomers to talk about their transition into the community and any challenges and successes they have encountered. These discussion groups could serve as a source of social support for the newcomers and help them to connect with others outside of the household. Psycho-educational workshops could be designed for both newcomers and residents. Workshops or presentations that educate them about forms of racism could help these newcomers make meaning of these encounters. Workshops that help newcomers develop the skills to effectively cope with racism could help to counteract the additive negative toll that recipients of racism bear.

On the flip side, workshops that educate the resident community about the challenges and barriers that newcomers experience could help build empathy and understanding for their neighbors. An example of the opportunity for receiving community members in all three communities was provided through the community forums, an event open to the public at which residents were able to learn about the perceptions of newcomers. Through the presentation, participants mentioned that many of the perceptions expressed by newcomers were also felt by residents, such as having similar experiences with government agency employees.

Finally, the development of the community depends not only on both groups coexisting within the same community but also developing a united front to address community issues and working together to build on the strengths each individual could offer. Creating opportunities for dialogue and relationship building between newcomers and members of the host community are critical to healthy progress. After reading and discussing the feelings of isolation and the barriers newcomers felt due to the lack of English, women in Community C suggested the possibility of holding social events, such as going shopping once a month with newcomer women, through which to interact and learn.

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