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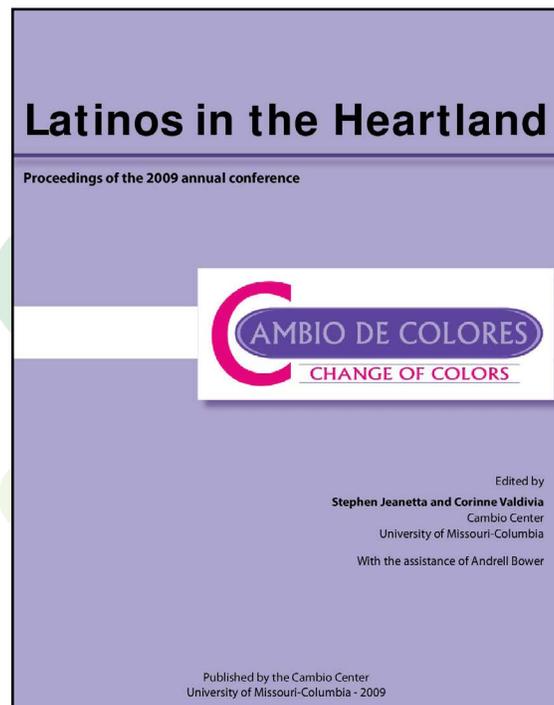
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The importance of social networks on Latino Immigrants' Well-being in Rural Missouri

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Abstract

Latino immigrants have been changing their settlement and migration patterns. Recent immigration has seen a different breed of immigrants headed to rural areas, composed of both genders and settled longer in receiving communities. This recent wave of immigration into the rural areas has been raising concerns about resource distribution and use.

Recently, monumental efforts have been put into research on Latinos' economic well-being because of its potential to disperse widespread fears of opportunism by Latino immigrant and point out alternative avenues of economic integration into the community. Recent research has shown that immigrant workforce is vital to the economic development of the communities receiving them. Besides contributing positively to the generation of income in the community, immigrants infuse these towns with diversity, which is vital to the socioeconomic survival of communities.

On the opposite side, some researchers claim that immigrants have been changing most of the small cities they have located in by draining city resources and altering the quality of life. However, the claim that Latino immigrants overwhelm social welfare services to sustain their well-being seems a little bit confusing because current law does not provide for it. A pertinent question is: in light of all these changes, how are immigrants sustaining or improving their well-being.

One avenue pointed out by the literature is that Latinos use their social networks for survival in these communities. This approach suggests that besides cost-benefit analysis, individuals factor into their decisions the ability to obtain help from social resources in order to make a living in these communities. Therefore, this study adopts the stance that social networks are really important, and our objective is to assess the impact of these social networks on immigrants' well-being in both Latino and selected Missouri rural communities. Using Sustainable Livelihoods framework as a starting point, this research intends to assess Latinos' well-being in these communities. In this study, a self-defined well-being measure, subjective well-being, is used as the dependent variable. For the independent variables, besides demographic variables, social capital is used as a proxy for social networks. Additionally, better measures of ethnicity and context of reception variables are introduced to help assess both the impact of Latinos in the community as well as the perception that Latinos have of their receiving communities. The study uses ordered probit regression 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' well-being due to the type of work that they have, irrespective of the areas in which they live.

Keywords: Latino social networks, Latino reception, economic integration

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.

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► The importance of social networks on Latino Immigrants' Well-being in Rural Missouri

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Context

The topic of changing patterns of Latino immigration, for example settling in rural versus urban areas, has been dominating the agendas of many social scientists as of late. Naturally, concerns have been expressed on the consequences of this shift in settlement patterns, especially how local communities benefit from this immigration and, on the other side, how immigrants sustain their livelihoods or well-being in these areas. This piece deals with the latter question.

Research has shown that besides contributing positively to the income generation in these communities, immigrants tend to contribute positively toward the socio-economic survival of local communities (Florida, 2002). Alternatively, immigrants have been accused of changing small towns where they live, straining local resources and altering the quality of life. However, the claim that Latino immigrants overwhelm social welfare services to sustain their well-being seems a little bit confusing since current law does not provide for it. The literature mentions that Latinos use their social networks for survival in these communities (Portes, 1998). That is, besides assessing the benefits to be derived from the move and the costs associated with it, the ability to obtain help from social networks in the community to sustain their livelihood also plays a key role in their selection of a suitable place to move (Massey and España, 1987). This study adopts the stance that social networks are important to newcomer well-being and develops an approach to assess these.

Analytical approach

The sustainable livelihood strategies model (Valdivia et al., 2007) provides a framework for the study of well-being based on access and control of assets, or capitals, as these contribute to economic activities that lead to outcomes. These capitals are social, cultural, economic/financial and human. The model goes beyond its uses in development by incorporating community context variables appropriate to processes by which groups differ in culture, race and country of origin (Valdivia et al., 2008). This model introduces the context of reception, where these endowments and capitals interplay to sustain well-being.

The proposed model takes a different approach in measuring well-being. The variable of interest is still latent but now is self-defined by the individual. This is contrary to the common objective measure, which is assessed through income and is ubiquitous in economics. This self-defined well-being measure (SWB) is used as the dependent variable (Diener et al., 2003). For the independent variables, besides demographic variables (**Z**), social capital (SK) is used as a proxy for social networks. Additionally, human (HK), cultural (CK) and financial/economic (EK) capitals are also used to estimate the impact of assets and networks on SWB. This paper used context of reception (CR) variables defined by the Latino newcomers; these were used to approximate the enabling environment the Latino immigrants perceived. Conceptually, the objective function is the following: $SWB = f(SK, HK, EK, CR, CK, Z)$

Empirical Method

The study uses structural equation methods to assess the impact of social network use on Latinos' well-being. It comparatively assesses the differential impact of social networks on well-being by stratifying the study by the areas in which they live. There were two communities assessed: community A, which is a diversified employment community, and community B, which has a single large employer. To operationalize the broad question addressed here, specific hypotheses were: Is there a single dominant form of SWB and SK? Are there multiple indicators of both? Confirmatory Factor Analysis was used to

identify the most relevant indicators of both factors. These indicators were then used to assess the impact of SK on SWB, using path analysis, a form of SEM analysis. This type of analysis is recommended in the estimation of factors that are latent and have multiple indicators, such as both SK and SWB.

A set of four manifest questions were used to create the dependent latent variable, SWB (Diener, 1998). The ones used in this study are presented in Table 1. Specific questions were also used to create the independent latent variables. The manifest indicators used to create the context of reception and cultural capital/identity variables were extracted from a standard set of questions commonly used in the psychological/behavioral economics literature. The construct validity of these indicators has been independently assessed. The instrument used to measure CR is called Bidimensional Acculturation Scale for Hispanics (Marin & Gamba, 1996). The SK variable was developed from purposefully built indicators aimed at measuring bonding, bridging and linking capitals. The manifest indicators used to assess SK are presented in Table 2. Human capital was assessed by a standard measure commonly used in economics, a latent indicator that used language ability and educational attainment as manifest variables.

Results and Discussion

A latent variable analysis using preliminary survey data as stratified by regions, A and B, was performed, and the estimation results are presented below. The first part presents CFA results then proceeds to present the path analysis results. Results from the CFA model suggest there is not a single dominant indicator for SWB. Because all results are significant at the 5 percent level, they were all kept for the path analysis. This suggests that in relation to the hypothesis stated above, these results confirm the literature's postulate of the existence of multiple indicators for SWB.

Table 1: Regression Weights for the CFA model identifying the indicators of SWB

Latent dependent variable	Indicators	Std. Estimate	Unstd. Estimate	S.E.	p-value
Subjective Well-being	Will not change anything in life	.605	.428	.177	***
	Achieved important things	.615	.825	.122	***
	Satisfied with life	.728	.749	.100	***
	Life conditions are excellent	.773	.907	.118	***
	Life is close to ideal	.656	.782	.112	***

*** Significant at 1 percent level

Data Source: Household Survey Asset Accumulation Project.

A similar situation is observed in the case of SK. That is, there is no single dominant form of SK. This conclusion suggests that a multi-faceted indicator does a better job of portraying Latino relationships in the community. Results show that with the exception of the linking capital, represented by community brokers, all other indicators have a positive effect on SK and are significant.

Table 2: Regression Weights for the CFA model identifying the SK indicators

Dependent Latent Variable	Indicators	Std. Estimate	Unstd. Estimate	S.E.	p-value
Social capital	Social group participation	.497	.729	.232	.002*
	Informal group participation	.565	.411	.278	.012*
	Family member present	.500	.882	.281	.002*
	Community brokers	-.054	-.273	.491	.578

* Significant at the 5 percent level

Data Source: Household Survey Asset Accumulation Project.

In relation to the second question, a full path model was fitted to assess impact of SK on SWB. The results are presented below. The SK variable exerts the greatest influence on well-being with a standardized estimate of .410 in A. This means that as the SK variable increases by one standardized unit, *ceteris paribus*, the SWB of Latinos in A increases by .410 standardized units. It could also be seen that only social and financial capital variables are significant at the 5 percent level or higher. These results were expected given the characteristics and dynamics of these communities. The standardized units are important because they help us compare two different factors' impacts on the dependent variable, given that they eliminate the unit of measurement. Thus, these results suggest that as a Latino's social network increases in size, its influence on well-being also increases. The impact of individual elements that make up SK could be seen in Table 2. For instance, having a family in the area and participating, or being a regular, in informal groups has a large impact on well-being of Latinos in this region.

Table 3a: Estimates for the impact of individual assets and context on SWB for region A.

Dependent Latent Variable	Exogenous Latent variables	Std. Estimates	Unstd. Estimate	S.E.	p-value
Subjective Well-being	Human capital	.134	2.041	2.737	.346
	Context of reception	.345	1.732	1.034	.094
	Cultural capital	-.394	-1.433	1.211	.093
	Social capital	.410	.053	.133	.007*
	Financial capital	.397	1.675	1.455	***

*** Significant at 1percent level; * Significant at 5 percent level

Data Source: Household Survey Asset Accumulation Project.

Comparatively, results indicate the impact of social networks is much more important to well-being in region B as compared to A. On the other hand, cultural and human capitals as well as the context of reception are not significant. A possible explanation to this phenomenon could be found in the Latinos' demographic composition in these areas and their objectives in migrating, both before and after. These issues are discussed below.

Table 3b: Estimates for the impact of individual assets and context on SWB for region B.

Dependent Latent Variable	Exogenous Latent variables	Std. Estimates	Unstd. Estimate	S.E.	p-value
Subjective Well-being	Human capital	.667	1.881	4.118	.173
	Context of reception	.042	1.354	3.533	.272
	Cultural capital	-.713	-3.738	3.985	.380
	Social capital	.793	2.330	4.267	.005*
	Financial capital	.395	1.805	3.872	.005*

* Significant at 5 percent level

Data Source: Household Survey Asset Accumulation Project.

Demographic composition, social network and subjective well-being

The sample data collected so far, for both regions, has more females than males. However, the Latinos males living in region B tend to be disproportionately young, single, uncertain of their future, less educated and most likely to move on to some other place. Moreover, a substantial part of these males have been in places whereby the context of reception has been deemed unfavorable to Latinos; this situation has made them skeptical of any outside help. Under these circumstances, survival instincts are immediately triggered, and any individual who is not from their inner milieu is not trusted. Social networking tends to strive in this kind of environment while community institutions tend to take second place or are even overlooked unless there is an emergency.

This preliminary analysis shows that SK has a positive impact on SWB. However, given that SK is affected by the CK, care should be taken in the interpretation of this impact. For instance, CK impact is negative. Under these circumstances, SK's effect on SWB borders on ambiguous. That is, it does not exactly exert a totally positive influence given that individuals are locked in the same circles, especially because the significant elements in defining SK in this study were of a bonding nature. Empirical research shows that Latinos tend to obtain most of their information about jobs from networks; however, most of this information is of menial jobs, which makes Latinos earn substantially less as compared to their Anglo-American peers (Ioannides & Loury, 2004). Thus, implicitly, the dependence on networks in these areas restricts the type of information Latinos can access, which makes it difficult to economically advance. Moreover, it can be seen that community (influence) brokers – linking social capital – is not even significant.

The situation is different in region A. Comparatively, in the data collected so far, the gender balance is not as disproportionately skewed. Although there are still more females in the sample, median age is slightly higher. There is also a higher proportion of married individuals, and many have expressed a desire to stay in the community longer. These people tend to see themselves as active members of their town and are eager to participate in its development. It could be seen that CR variable is actually significant in region A, and SK variable has a greater impact in region B. SK still exerts large influence on SWB but much less than in region B.

All of these are signs that people living in these towns have fundamentally two different approaches on how to carry out their livelihood. These differences could be partly explained by the sizes and dynamics of these towns, which pull individuals with different characteristics and livelihood strategies. Additionally, region A's population is nearly 10 times larger than region B's. This allows for the establishment of institutions that are more attuned to the needs of people such as these Latino immigrants, which in turn might attract more people. There is also a higher possibility of finding individuals who are willing to help immigrants for the benefit of the whole town—the creative class in Florida's terms. Although Latinos in

region B might see it as a place to come work, earn income and move on, people in A tend to have longer term horizon for their plans.

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