

LATINOS IN MISSOURI

**Occasional Paper Series
Department of Rural Sociology
University of Missouri-Columbia**



Immigration, Mobility and Community in a Global World

***Latinos in Missouri* Occasional Paper Series, No. 4
Department of Rural Sociology, University of Missouri-Columbia**

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The *Latinos in Missouri* occasional paper series grew out of the writing experiences of graduate students in Rural Sociology 406: The Sociology of Globalization. Students in the class were required to write term papers on issues related to the growth of the Latino population in the state as an aspect of globalization. Typically, the papers were developed over the semester by making contact with Latino immigrants for in-depth interviews, although some papers make use of secondary data such as the U.S. Census. Each of these papers was reviewed by two of the student editors listed above. Student editors then returned the papers to the author with their suggestions. After these revisions were incorporated, I edited each paper one more time, returning it to the author with my final editorial comments. When these changes were made, the papers were posted to our website for downloading.

While these are graduate student class papers and limited in length and scope, they do represent a substantial amount of work on the part of the authors that generally goes well beyond a typical class requirement. They were written in the hope that they will be read and used by policy makers, agency personnel and service providers, teachers, community leaders, and anyone concerned with the well-being of Latino immigrants in the state, and indeed in the nation.

Many thanks to the student authors and editors who worked on these papers, and particularly to those individuals who shared generously of their time to provide the information gathered here.

Dr. Elizabeth Barham (BarhamE@missouri.edu)

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the relationship between mobility and how Latino immigrants and internal migrants to Columbia, Missouri, experience community. I present literature on community and mobility, primarily that related to the importance of places, social interaction, and networks. I also place this discussion in the context of a global system that brings issues of immigration to the forefront. Information from two interviews conducted using a grounded theory approach is used to illustrate the community attachments formed by newcomers to Columbia, and their implications. I find that although there are things that encourage attachment to the community, there are also notable barriers to full participation in the community. Through this research, I seek to empower communities by shedding light on the experiences of immigrants in a world where labor is increasingly mobile internationally. Hopefully, communities will use this information to facilitate productive activities and programs to include im/migrants in the community and accept their contributions.

Globalization is an important part of the discourse surrounding community and economic development. Although there is some controversy surrounding the issue, most agree that this is an age where flows of people and money are increasing (Freidman 2000; McMichael 1996; Sassen 1999a). Increased movement of people across international borders has particular implications for international and national policies, as well as impacting local communities (Sassen 1999a, 1999b). Hamilton and Chinchilla (1991) suggest and show that migration is, at least in part, the result of the logic of capitalist development worldwide. In this context, immigration becomes a very important part of a very large, complex system. Indeed, if “individual decisions occur within a framework of internal and international structures that condition individual needs and the choices available”(Hamilton and Chinchilla 1991:91) then we need to take a closer look at the implications of this for those affected. I look at the experiences of people at the local community level where economic policies and practices are played out in the lives of individuals caught in an increasingly global world.

Background

Immigrants come to the United States for many different reasons. Regional opportunity structures influence the population of immigrants attracted to an area. I focus my attention on one particular place within the overall context of the United States. Missouri has experienced a

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dramatic increase in its Latino/a population between 1990 and 2000 (OSED A 2001). Research suggests that for many towns in Missouri it is hard to know exactly what percentage of the population is Latino/a because of a high rate of in and out migration. For example, research by Campbell and Case (2000) shows that most Latino/a residents in Sedalia, Missouri, have been there less than three years, and almost half less than one year. The majority of these Latino/a migrants are originally from Mexico, and about half are coming into the community directly from places outside the country, primarily for work opportunities. Food processing plants that draw immigrant workers to Missouri. The work is demanding and high turnover rates are normal. With these challenges, participating in the community and building cohesion can be challenging for both immigrants and established residents.

The University of Missouri-Columbia Office of Social and Economic Data Analysis (OSED A 2001) however, shows that even within Missouri there are mobility trends that differ by county and region. This suggests that there are a variety of reasons for who moves where and why. Boone County, in Mid-Missouri, is one of the most diverse areas demographically for Latinos/as in terms of background characteristics such as education and country of origin, as well as having one of the larger concentrations of Latinos/as in Missouri outside of major cities. There was an increase of more than one thousand Latino/a residents from 1990 through the year 2000, following a trend that began in the previous decade (OSED A 2001). This may be, in part, due to the fact that Columbia is an economic hub and hosts two colleges and a major state university. I focus my attention on two immigrants to this community in order to examine the intricacies of community for Latinos in one locality. Obviously, there is variation in experiences within the Latino/a migrant population. This paper opens a discussion of individual community experiences for Latino/as in order to see relationships and patterns across differences.

Literatures

Community is often defined as being associated with a specific place, or locality. Some researchers argue that this is becoming irrelevant with an emerging mass society (Martindale 1963; Shils 1972; Warren 1972). However, this argument ignores the importance of everyday interactions and the simple fact that people live and experience life situated in places (Wilkinson 1991). Although we cannot deny the influence of the larger society, we cannot be so naive as to ignore the continuing importance of place in the experience of community.

Local community is a complex system of friendship, kinship, and associational ties and networks. It passes through its own life-cycle as it incorporates new residents and generations. Wilkinson (1991) describes social interaction as the essential ingredient in community. Although there are many community aspects, some unique to individual communities, all share this important element in general. In an effort to understand community, Kasarda and Janowitz (1974) found that “the number of friends is the overall most important type of social bond influencing community sentiments” (Kasarda and Janowitz 1974:335). Other social ties also have an influence (Granovetter, 1973; Marsden, 1987), including the number of relatives living nearby (Kasarda and Janowitz 1974).

Length of residence has direct effects on micro level variables such as local friendships and participation. Data suggest that:

the important social forces that undermine an individual's integration into the local community are (. . .) multilevel systemic factors such as residential mobility and sparse friendship ties, and other factors anticipated but just beginning to be understood---fear of crime and attenuated collective attachment (Sampson 1988:778).

The inconsistency between participation in the community and wanting to stay in the community may indicate that community “interest” is not the same thing as community attachment or community satisfaction (Brown, 1993; Kasarda and Janowitz 1974). Community is shaped by the social interactions of its members, and an individual’s experience in the community is shaped by their interactions with other members in that community. As people become more mobile there is a greater potential for social ties to be interrupted making it harder to participate in community, or perhaps changing the way that community is experienced.

Some suggest that mobility makes community attachment more difficult, while others argue that these effects quickly deteriorate leaving few adverse effects (Boland 1997). Variation in both why and how people move from one place to another are essential indicators of how this process will likely play out. Boland (1997) finds that motivation for moving, choices and distances are major influences shaping the attitudes of new residents in a community. Understanding motivations and consequences for moving is more difficult when they are embedded in national policies affected by global economic changes, because it is more complex.

In addition, change is more dramatic when individuals and families move to an entirely new country. Frey (1996) indicates that immigrants have different mobility patterns than internal migrants. He shows that internal migrants have different destinations because of the increased freedom, choices and information resources that are available to them (Frey 1996). Global demands for labor also have direct impacts on immigration. “Immigration is not an optional process, but one driven by the structural requirements of advanced capitalist accumulation” (Portes 1996 quoted in Jonas, 1999:100).

People interested in human rights call attention to the double standards surrounding national and international social policies that ignore the demand for labor across borders in the new economic policies that they embrace. This may have serious consequences for immigrants that come to work in countries with especially negative immigration policies and attitudes (Haus 1999; Sassen 1999b; Skinner 1999). This is particularly significant when labor is recruited by employers, while at the same time, scorned or unacknowledged by the surrounding communities.

This literature provides a background for looking at these issues more closely. In this study I examine the intersection of community experiences with mobility and immigration. I hope to be able to understand more clearly the particular experiences of Latino/a immigrants to Missouri. This informs the issue of how communities can facilitate productive activities and programs to help im/migrants become a part of the community and accept their contributions for the benefit of all.

Data and Methods

I drew participants for this study from the Latino immigrant population in Columbia, Missouri. I interviewed two men with very different background experiences, specifically in migration patterns and amount of time they have lived in the community. An interpreter accompanied me in the interviews so that participants would feel comfortable expressing themselves in either English or Spanish. Using the grounded theory approach, we openly discussed thoughts and feelings surrounding community (Glaser et al 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). A questionnaire was used to guide conversation (See Appendix A). Participants expressed enthusiasm for the subject and talked candidly of their experiences of migrating to, and living in, Columbia.

Participants

Felix and Ramon (names are changed to preserve anonymity) are both Hispanic men living in Columbia, but with very different backgrounds and experiences. Felix, 29, moved to Missouri from Caracas, Venezuela, when he was 13 years old to attend a military boarding school. He has visited Venezuela many times, but has lived in the United States continuously since he arrived here. After dropping out of the university when he had a baby with his girlfriend six years ago, he has worked a number of jobs. He now works full time installing insulation in homes, and has been with the same company for nearly two years. His parents have recently moved to Florida where he visits them regularly. He hopes to move there soon himself. Felix is able to speak fluidly in English.

Ramon, 23, has lived in the United States for about five years, frequently moving from place to place. Originally from Chihuahua, Mexico, he has lived in California, Denver, Virginia, North Carolina and Iowa before coming to Missouri. He has been in Columbia for about a year and a half. He works a full time job in construction, pouring and spreading cement. His family still lives in Mexico, where he sends money each month to help his parents with their expenses. Ramon struggles to communicate in English and is more comfortable speaking in Spanish. He expects to stay in Columbia “for a little while,” eventually settling down in Mexico, unless he “finds the right girl” here.

Analysis and Discussion

In our conversations, I was listening for expressions and sentiments of attachment to Columbia as a community. I was also seeking to understand how being a new resident, specifically an immigrant resident of the community, impacts this sense of attachment. Several themes surrounding how and why Felix and Ramon did, or did not, attach to the community emerged from the discussions. These include: people and place, discrimination, language, economic opportunity and social opportunities for participation.

Columbia is a nice place to live. It is a safe, relatively quiet town with a college ambience. Especially Felix cites these qualities as important variables in choosing this community as a place to live, in particular, and Ramon agrees. Comparing Columbia with the big cities where they have lived in the past, these men appreciate the safety that they feel in town. Although Felix wishes for more variety for his six-year-old daughter, he is very happy with the “college

scene” that offers a fun nightlife for him. Both Felix and Ramon describe Columbia as a friendly place. “People smile at you when they walk down the street” (Felix). This helps these men feel more comfortable in participating in some community activities. Ramon reports that he still spends more time with other Hispanics in places where they are likely to congregate together, but he attributes this to his language barrier.

There are conflicting articulations about discrimination in the community. Both men agree that “there is no racism” but also express strong sentiments of “people with an accent are suspect” (Felix), and “police harass people” (Felix) describing an incident of suspected racial profiling. The examples and explanations of discrimination given in the interviews reflect the perception that although there are individuals that discriminate, on the whole there is not a strong negative sentiment toward Hispanics in Columbia. However, Ramon and Felix report a perceived increased negative reaction toward Hispanics and other minority groups because of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon. They are afraid of being seen as “un-American” because of their skin color and/or their accents.

The ability to speak English with and without an accent are important markers in the community. Felix does not struggle as Ramon does with speaking English, but he insists that having an accent has a significant effect on how he relates to others in the community. It is sometimes linked to discrimination, and Felix particularly resents the fact that “if you speak Spanish, everyone assumes that you are Mexican.” Language is also obviously an important variable in other forms of community participation. “You have a really hard time if you don’t speak English. You cannot do anything, or a lot of things because you need to be able to communicate to do things” (Felix).

Because Ramon currently struggles with English, he spends most of his time with other Hispanics and with people who can translate for him if necessary. He is embarrassed and reluctant to participate in any activity where English is required, which makes it hard to get things done. Although he understands most of what he hears, it is still very intimidating for him to try to speak to others in English. This is an important barrier that he recognizes and wants to eliminate. Felix and Ramon both expressed that one of the most important reasons they chose to come to Columbia was to learn English. Ramon stated, “There is not many Hispanic people and I can learn English.” He especially highlighted this as an important characteristic because of his experiences in other parts of the United States. But he acknowledges the difficulty in interacting with people outside of work, where most people speak Spanish, or at the Mexican restaurants where he sometimes goes to hang out. While both men acknowledge the opportunity to learn English through increased interaction with people who do not speak Spanish, they also report that this opportunity is harder to take advantage of than they initially thought.

Opportunities for work and economic stability are relatively high in Columbia. The cost of living is also a major inducement to live in Columbia. “In Columbia it is cheaper to live, you end up with more money to spend” (Ramon). This is especially true for Ramon, but relevant for both men. Columbia is perceived as a place where good jobs are located. Ramon indicated that in comparison to other places he has lived, there is less competition for jobs here. While neither Felix nor Ramon work in the meat packing plants in nearby towns, some of their friends do. They describe this work as grueling, but it often pays well enough for individuals to save money

to get ahead or to send back to members of their family still living at home. Construction is also an important occupation for Hispanics in Columbia. Felix and Ramon work in this industry and consider their jobs to be very good ones. Ramon sends a portion of his earnings to Mexico every month and still feels that he is able to spend money on whatever he would like. Compared to other places he has lived, he feels that this is a major advantage to living in Missouri.

While both men agree that one thing that initially attracted them to Columbia was the relatively small number of Hispanic people, both also lament the shrouded Hispanic presence in the community. Citing other communities that they have visited or heard about, Felix and Ramon describe their ideal communities as places where there are stores that sell products that they miss from home (i.e. Mexico or Venezuela), have a Spanish newspaper, and Hispanic parades and festivals. Ramon is especially discouraged by the absence of a church that he can attend in Spanish each week. There is only one Catholic Church in Columbia that currently holds Mass in Spanish, and this is only once a month. Both men agree that this is the most important barrier to feeling like they belong in the community and that they are accepted as full participants or residents. They describe Hispanics as “not [having] much unity” and needing a voice in the community. Felix believes that “until the community listens to the concerns and ideas of the Hispanic people, they are not going to feel like they have support.” Clearly, participation in the community, and making a contribution to the community is essential for community attachment.

The experiences of Ramon and Felix suggest that immigrant residents, whether new or established, face challenges to community participation and attachment in Columbia. Clearly we see that place, social interaction, and networks are all important in their experiences. Felix and Ramon are attached in one way to the community because it offers a good safe place to live where they can make enough money to meet their needs. But there are obstacles to community participation that impede attachments in other ways, including discrimination, communication and language problems, and disorganization among Hispanics that leads to invisibility in the formal community. More than anything else, the feeling that Hispanics are not heard or formally included through media and other mechanisms seems to disincline community attachment and participation.

Conclusions

Understanding issues surrounding immigration is increasingly important in a world that is organized globally. Community of origin, processes of immigration, reasons for coming to a community and associated expectations of migrants most likely influence experiences once they arrive in new communities. However, the communities themselves clearly influence the experience as well. Communities of all sizes must be prepared, and know how to welcome new immigrant residents. This study proposes that one important part of this process should be to develop ways for immigrants to have a voice in the community. This takes many forms, and can include media such as newspapers and radio programs directed to Hispanic residents, leaders that represent Hispanic members of the community, and cultural festivals and holidays that are meaningful to new Hispanic residents. Columbia may or may not be adequately addressing the needs of Hispanic residents, but according to Felix and Ramon, it is still a friendly place for Hispanics. One example of progress toward this end is the well-attended Hispanic music that is played at Chevy’s on Thursday nights. Also, the Centro Latino is a community organization that

seeks to help Hispanics integrate into the community and access community services and information.

In sum, this research suggests that communities can do a lot to aid in the attachment and participation of growing numbers of Hispanic immigrants in this country. Communities must foster the attitudes and infrastructure to include new immigrant residents in the community. They can support activities and programs that offer a voice to these new residents, recognizing the strengths that they bring, and allowing everyone to be involved in the creation of a strong, unified community.

As globalization policies continue to move labor and capital around the world, we can expect that community attachment of new residents will become increasingly important for local communities. This study indicates some of the challenges to attachment for Hispanic immigrants in one mid sized mid-western town. But the issues developed here are widely relevant. Capitalist forces that bring new immigrants to the United States do not necessarily recognize or assuage the problems or issues this may create. These are left for local communities and the residents that live in them. This research takes a brief look at immigration as it relates to community participation and attachment. Two interviews are obviously only the tip of the iceberg concerning what we might find in a more in-depth exploration of this subject. However the stories of Felix and Ramon demonstrate the importance of promoting a sense of community in a global world, and offer some cursory insights to facilitate the process.

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