NEW LATINO IMMIGRANTS TO PHOENIX: THEIR EXPERIENCES AND PROSPECTS

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RESEARCH OVERVIEW

The recent influx of Central Americans, Cubans, and Mexican newcomers to the Phoenix metropolitan area has the potential to alter the sociocultural, political, and economic landscapes of this city. This project documents how these newer immigrants, in their everyday interactions with one another and the local community, contribute to and are affected by local dynamics of urban life.

When our research began over two years ago, our original intent was to delineate the varying socioeconomic and cultural paths of incorporation of these new Latino immigrants. We set out with an interest in understanding how the initial resources and context of reception affect the newcomer’s incorporation, and utilized Portes and Zhou’s segmented assimilation theory as our framework. This theory counters the assumption of a unilinear process of adaptation. In particular, segmented assimilation focuses on the initial resources that immigrants bring and the social context that greets immigrants in the host culture when seeking to understand settlement processes among immigrants. There are several resources that influence the adjustment of immigrants in a new society. High levels of education and occupational skills enable immigrants to meet the challenges encountered in a different economy. Social networks also facilitate the adjustment process by helping immigrants find jobs and housing. Immigrants with a wealth of human capital and social resources will likely have less difficulty adapting than those with limited resources.

The context of reception may also shape the adjustment process of immigrants. Reactions of the host government and employers, values and prejudices of the surrounding native population, and degree of solidarity and sense of community among co-ethnics are central in molding the adjustment process (Portes and Böröcz, 1989). These factors channel immigrants along divergent paths of adaptation.

RESEARCH STUDY

During the first year of the project in 1998, we conducted 40 intensive interviews with immigrants in the Phoenix Metropolitan area. Additionally, we interviewed Latino community workers, leaders, and social service providers. These interviews provided us with a wealth of information concerning the everyday lives of our participants, and were able to tell us a great deal about the economic activities in which these immigrants engage, the inter-ethnic relations between established immigrants and newcomers, the conditions of the neighborhoods in which these immigrants live, and the interactions these immigrants had with and within different social institutions – including health, educational, and religious institutions.
Nevertheless, while analyzing our field notes and the many discussions we had, we found that immigrants took divergent paths that did not follow with their level of social resources or human capital. While some immigrants confirmed the powerful effects of the initial resources they brought with them and the positive context of reception on their fate, it could not totally explain the extreme variety of experiences that new Latino immigrants undergo – in other words, we discovered immigrants lacking education yet owning successful businesses at the same time that we met highly-educated newcomers, with refugee status, unable to gain a significant footing.

This was an issue that needed further examining, which could only be undertaken through longitudinal data. We wanted to increase our understanding of how the employment patterns of these immigrants would change, as well as how length of residence affects other issues, including networks and gender relations, neighborhood and school concerns, patterns of geographical mobility, and legal status. By assessing the immigrants’ perceptions of how well they think they are adjusting, we felt we would also gain a better sense of whether this affects their participation in the communities in which they reside.

This summer, with the help of another Center for Urban Inquiry Research Grant, we were able to conduct additional fieldwork and re-interview those immigrants we met the previous summer. By the end of the summer, we contacted and re-interviewed 20 of our initial participants. The remaining 20 participants, however, were unable to be found. These immigrants no longer lived in the same apartment complexes and did not keep in contact with neighbors and community workers. In addition, since the participants were generally unrelated to one another, we had no sources of information from which to garner what happened to these individuals. This high degree of mobility was not unexpected, given the precarious nature of most recent immigrants’ quotidian lives. Whether the émigrés moved to another part of the city, to another city entirely, or back to their home countries, this is certainly one of the most telling aspects of our longitudinal research.

We interviewed 20 new participants to add to the diversity of experiences. In the end, we had a total of 60 participants and 80 transcribed interviews. Our study, then, includes a rich representation of newcomers from the chief origin sources of Latin American migration to Phoenix. As Figure 1.1 demonstrates, 31% come from Cuba, 30% from El Salvador, 18% from Guatemala, and 17% from Southern Mexico. We also interviewed a couple of immigrants from Colombia and Honduras (part of an increasing population after Hurricane Mitch). The variety of circumstances that brought these immigrants to Phoenix is just one of the elements that we uncovered during the course of our research.
Figure 1.2 indicates that more than 60% of our participants were female, which in part, stems from our ability to access women more easily than men throughout the study period. Figure 1.3 shows the vast majority of immigrants were less than forty years old. This demographic portrait is generally reflective of the overall immigrant experience – in which the majority of migration takes place when people are in their twenties and thirties. The few older newcomers that we spoke with generally arrived in the Phoenix metro area under extraordinary circumstances and as refugees.

While we quickly realized that there is no such thing as a “Little Salvador” or “Little Havana” in Phoenix, we were able to distinguish pockets of newcomer settlement throughout the metro area as demonstrated in Figure 1.4. These pockets can in no way be distinguished along ethnic lines, but instead reflect areas that host a mixture of new Latino immigrants.

1999 RESEARCH FINDINGS

There are three significant research themes that we can identify from the analysis of the 1999 interviews which are mobility, everyday life experiences, and future prospects. Many people, especially people migrating from California come to the Phoenix area because it is an urban center but is not as big as the cities they moved from (i.e. L.A. and the surrounding areas). These immigrants feel that Phoenix is relatively safer and cleaner, and like the “smallness” of it in comparison to the L.A. area. Interestingly, those people who are financially successful moved from California to Phoenix to expand a business that was already in existence in California. Others like Cuban immigrants were settled here by Cuban based agencies and partnership agencies like Catholic Social Services, because of more opportunities and the growing community of Cuban immigrants living in the metropolitan area. Still others heard through relatives and friends about opportunities in Phoenix prior to immigrating or already had family in the Phoenix area.

Their experiences during their time in the metropolitan area were also diverse, beginning with their migratory experiences. For instance, some immigrants had paid a coyote up to $2,000 to cross over the U.S. international border and a few had been caught by the border patrol, while other immigrants had flown to their destination with no problem at all. A few had even returned to their home countries to help their families enter the U.S. with the help of a coyote. Several of these people were equipped with social networks (friends, family, social agencies), while others came to the Phoenix area not knowing anyone.
People typically began working as campesinos (farmworkers), house cleaners and hotel cleaners, as cooks and bus boys at fast food restaurants, as car washers, and some even went through training with the help of Catholic Social Services to become an electrician or to begin taking English courses. On the other extreme, we met people who were more financially successful and who opened their own restaurants or specialization stores oriented toward Latinos. Other people found success in owning and operating mobile ice cream trucks or working as an English as a Second Language Tutor at a community college. Several women we spoke to managed their homes and cared for their children. Many of these people continued to hold the same jobs as they had had when we first interviewed them, however, we did find that their living accommodations had changed considerably.

We noted that there was a great deal of movement within the city from neighborhood to neighborhood. Approximately 50% of the people interviewed in 1998 moved to new locations. Fourteen people from last year could not be found. Their main reason for re-locating was to move to a safer place. People’s housing arrangements and luxuries varied tremendously. Their housing experiences ranged from five people living in a dilapidated two bedroom apartment to a four person family living in a spacious four bedroom, two-story home with a pool. Those who are financially secure feel safe in their neighborhoods and do not have the same fears as people living in drug infested neighborhoods. Their environments are more stable and secure for their children, which gives these children an advantage over those who live in downtrodden neighborhoods. These children are susceptible to a path of downward mobility as a consequence of the lack of social capital that their parents have. Most of the immigrants that did move to another neighborhood moved to areas that seemed more aesthetically pleasing to them. They saw this as a step toward their upward mobility, even though it may have only been a move a few blocks down the road or to another poor community.

Those people who remain in their ‘old’ neighborhoods, however, voice a desire to move from their present locations. Many people have had their apartments and cars broken into, and are aware of frequent drug dealing that takes place within their apartment complexes or nearby homes, and within close proximity to their homes. One man has even been shot twice at a nearby park. He does not leave his neighborhood since he has no other recourse but to stay in his crime-infested community. One woman single-handedly stopped a robbery from taking place at the fast food restaurant she works at, despite being threatened by the restaurant robbers. She lives in the same location and must continue to walk to work, fearful of the robbers’ threats. More than half of these immigrants are caught in a
cycle of poverty since the majority of avenues available to them are only within low-paying jobs and poor communities. They measure their successes in the U.S. through these avenues.

Their prosperity is measured through financial success and social status, and how they are contributing to the overall future of their children. The most frequent reasons given for coming to the U.S. for these people was to find work and to better secure the future of their children. The amount of social capital that is provided to their children has many implications for them. As this second generation grows old enough to work, they are oftentimes competing with their parents for similar jobs. More stable families however, can afford material goods for their children that others can not. Their physical environments also has a great impact on their future successes. Those with more secure financial situations and social networks are more inclined to financially prosper, while those children in poorer communities and whose parents find themselves in dire straits, are more susceptible to downward mobility.

However, these visible examples of segmented assimilation do not explain away certain people’s successes over others. For instance, one man from Cuba was working at a car wash in 1998, even though he had been a physical education teacher in Cuba. He explained to us that he felt very depressed, missed his family, and was too old at age 48 to learn English. We were unable to locate him in 1999. He no longer had the same circle of friends and his former friends did not know of his whereabouts. He had received help from Catholic Social Services and was given refugee status which was more help than immigrants typically receive. Another man who is from El Salvador had a more prosperous outcome, even though he came to the U.S. with some high school education and no social networks. He is a single father of three children who owns his own home and is remodeling it, drives a fairly new model car, bought new furniture for his home, has a secure job as a bail bondsman, and takes his children out to a sit down dinner almost every night. He also has a baby sitter. He wanted his children to have material things in order to entice them to want to financially succeed. Ironically, the Cuban man had had a much better education than the man from El Salvador. He had been a physical education teacher in Cuba, but was not doing as well here. The Salvadoran man was succeeding against the odds that would have placed him as the more disadvantaged immigrant.

These immigrants’ successes in terms of financial stability and social status are measured through their bifocal frame of reference to their home country. Oftentimes, people will measure their prosperity by comparing their present situation to that which they had in their home country. Comparatively speaking, they are doing much better than they did in their home country. They are able to send money back to their families in their home country and
can at times send tangible goods. Not surprisingly, their social status is automatically elevated due to living in the U.S. Several of the interviewees speak of how people change once they come to the U.S. but often believe that they have not changed since their migration. Some people, however, do have a tendency to separate themselves from more recent immigrants if they have lived in the U.S. for more than approximately 5-8 years. Their grounding in the U.S. is much more cemented and people are often guided by perceptions of one another as they learn them through social networks, the media, and personal experiences. Their frames of reference are typically between themselves and people ‘back home’, although they could at times compare their relative successes to other immigrants in the country (i.e. neighbors, friends, co-workers).

They do not, however, compare their status or situations to people born in the U.S. There is no mention of how their life experiences compare or are parallel to ‘Americans’. Their neighborhoods are predominantly Latino and their children play mostly with other Latino children. The stores they shop at and other services they acquire are ‘Latino friendly’ where people usually speak Spanish or are Latino or U.S. born Latinos.

Generally speaking, as researchers and perhaps even as readers some of us may view these immigrant experiences as disruptive and even life altering, but we have found that these people are very resilient. It is a matter of survival for these immigrants. For many of these people there aren’t many alternatives, so they will take any opportunity to better their status and future prospects regardless of the hardships involved.
REFERENCES
