Factors Easing Adaptation of Latina Immigrants to a Rural Midwestern Community

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(Study in progress – preliminary report)

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Introduction

Zuleidy would just like to be able to go outside and sweep the sidewalk, to walk down the street and talk to her neighbors, to find a job. Two years ago she and Cesar came with their family for the apples. The orchards hire help for the harvest, and lots of folks come up from Texas to work. It’s a beautiful place, with the hills and the streams, especially in the fall when the air is crisp and the leaves color the hillsides. Now Cesar and their son have jobs making components for satellite antennas at the factory. Their daughter is doing well at the high school, and their youngest just started preschool. Zuleidy studies English, but her confidence is low, so she’s afraid to talk to people. Her daughter or her husband has to go with her to translate when she needs to shop, get a haircut, go to the doctor, go anywhere, really. She misses the mountains. She misses her family. She misses the picnics they used to have by the waterfall. But, most of all, she misses being outside, having friends, cooking and working in the rhythms of the place she knows, the place where she felt like herself.

1 The words "Latino," "Latina," and "Hispanic" are imprecise. They identify a culturally, ethnically, nationally, and linguistically diverse group of people. Those described by these terms are generally assumed to be of Spanish, Portuguese, indigenous, or mestizo heritage and to identify with areas in the portions of the United States formerly owned by or a part of Mexico or Spain or with countries south of the United States in the Western Hemisphere. When citing other studies or statistics, I will use the terms used by the author of the article or book cited to identify the population discussed. In quoting participants in this study, I will, of course, use the words they used. In order to avoid the awkward and repetitive use of the phrase “women who were born in Latin America” to describe the participants in this study, I employ the term “newcomers.” In other instances, I use the words, Latino, Latina or Latino/a, with their above meaning, for lack of a better term. For an excellent explanation of the problems inherent in the use of the word “Hispanic,” see Castillo (1974).
Monica doesn’t get to town much. She doesn’t go anywhere. Sometimes she calls her brother on the phone, and she talks to her husband when he comes home from the barn. Most of the time, though, she and her daughter stay in the little house on the farm, watching television to try to learn English. She was happy to have a visitor when I came to interview her. There are other Mexicans working on farms nearby. Occasionally they all get together for a holiday meal, but not very often. The others don’t have wives here, so Jorge doesn’t want her to talk to them.

Rosario is teaching some of her co-workers at the factory a little bit of Spanish. Her family worked in the orchards years ago. When her husband left her and the girls out in California, she tried to make it work. No matter how many hours she worked, though, the jobs didn’t pay enough to live on – the costs were so high. So they came back here seven years ago. She’s glad they did.

Rural America is changing. Traditionally when one spoke of a small town in the Midwest, the image was of streets and neighborhoods where everyone looked much the same, spoke the same language, and had a shared past that went back several generations. As this picture begins to take on additional hues and textures through the arrival of immigrant populations from other parts of the world, our small towns are working to redefine their understanding of what they are and of what they are becoming.

As the population of a Midwestern town begins to increase and to diversify, community leaders develop plans to address the changes they see and to direct those changes into patterns they feel are positive. Rarely are the opinions of newcomers solicited or given import. Immigrants, in
particular, often find themselves stereotyped and marginalized. They may be seen as a population in need of services rather than as a welcome addition to the social and economic capital of the area. Programs meant to address the needs of the immigrants may neglect the most severe problems they face while concentrating on issues that are not as troublesome. This study provides supporting evidence that may be used to reverse this dynamic.

Background

Historically, immigrants to the United States have come first to large urban areas where they lived in enclaves peopled by others very like themselves. Neighbors were often from the same area of the sending country and knew each other before the migration. At the least, they shared a common language as well as cultural histories and assumptions (Settles 2001). Ethnic networks within cities provided support to newcomers through formal and informal associations (Gjerde 1999). Kandel and Cromartie (2003) found that, as Hispanic migrants began to resettle in large numbers in rural areas of the Midwest in the 1990’s, residential segregation at the neighborhood level followed many of them into their new homes. Although this segregation may serve to keep support structures intact, it often has a negative impact on the immigrants’ integration within the community and on that community’s attitudes toward the newcomers. When immigrants disperse into rural communities away from populations of co-ethnics, however, they leave support structures behind.

Immigrant populations are, by their nature as newcomers, isolated from the decision making councils of their new communities. This is particularly the case in rural areas with relatively stable populations where the power structures of the community may have remained unchanged.
for generations. Isolation is exacerbated by the immigrants’ language, cultural, and, often, racial differences from the majority population. Women may be especially isolated by cultural roles that keep them in the home and by inhibitions against communicating outside of family networks (Santisteban & Mitrani 2003).

Purpose

The intent of this study is to explore the perceptions of Latin American women now living in a small Midwestern city and its vicinity and to give those women an opportunity to begin to inform community leaders about their experiences, their abilities and their needs. The study is particularly concerned with the perceptions of these women of their own sense of isolation or involvement, factors making their transition and adaptation more or less difficult, and their ideas about ways they can contribute to the community.

Description of site

The city studied here is, in many ways, typical of towns in the rural Midwest. Originally settled by descendants of immigrants from a variety of western European countries during the westward migration of the mid-nineteenth century, the county has had a relatively stable population of approximately 17,000 – 20,000 for the past 100 years. Some families living in the community today can trace their lineage from those original settlers (Butterfield & Ogle 1884).

Founded in 1851, the city originally served as a support center for the agricultural county surrounding it. With the connection of a railroad line in 1876 it became a logging center and began to grow more quickly. Manufacturing of cheese and other dairy products was a primary
industry through the 1940’s (Econ. Dev. Corp. 2003). Today a majority of residents work in
manufacturing, agriculture, retail trade, and educational services (Brockmiller 2003). In
addition, tourism, local government, and medical care are significant employers in the county
(Chamber 2003).

The population of the city grew from 660 in 1860 to 4,364 in 1940. (Econ. Dev. Corp. 2003) Of
the 5,114 inhabitants enumerated in the 2000 census, 97.7% identified themselves as
“White–non Hispanic.” Although the Hispanic population is small (0.9%) it is important to note
that it is the largest minority in the city and has increased substantially in the past decade. Of
the seventy-nine residents who were born abroad, forty were born in Latin America, sixteen in
Europe, twenty-one in Asia, and two in Northern America (US Census Profile 2000). The
number of residents born in Latin America gains more significance when we realize that, of the
foreign-born residents living in the city at the time of the 2000 census, twenty-one were
international students studying at the university campus.² Of the students, six were born in
Europe, fourteen in Asia and one in Latin America. Thus, if we exclude foreign exchange
college students³ from the totals, two-thirds of all foreign born residents in the city in 2000 were
born in Latin America. Racial minorities enumerated in the 2000 census include eight Black or
African American residents, thirteen American Indian and Alaskan Native residents, and
seventeen Asian residents (US Census). Of the racial minorities, one Black resident and fifteen
Asian residents were foreign exchange students at the university. Although other immigrants
have, over the years, come to this city and made it their home, they have typically either come

² The university in this city is a two-year campus of the University of Wisconsin. Foreign exchange
students typically study there for one or two years before transferring elsewhere. These students
rarely plan to become long-term residents in the city.
³ The city’s high school also has an active foreign exchange student program, but I was unable
to determine how many foreign born high school students were included in the census totals.
one at a time, marrying into a local family which supports them in their adaptation and integration into the community, or they have come through the university or high school system with access to its orientation and international student advising services.

Other small towns and cities in the area have seen dramatic increases in their Latino populations during this period and have been more actively studied. Most significantly, the town of Norwalk, Wisconsin, has been featured in a number of books, articles, and studies (Martinez 2001, Jenkins, Mallett & Tempelis 2003, Wisconsin Rural Partners 1998, McNeilly, McNeilly, Lein and Brown 1997). Valley Pride, the meatpacking plant at Norwalk, needed workers and recruited more than two hundred laborers from Mexico in the early 1990’s. Within months, one-third of this small village’s population was made up of single, Spanish-speaking men from Mexico and other Latin American countries (Jenkins et al. 2003). Cultural misunderstandings and resentments were common, bringing with them a high level of tension. Local citizens organized Amigos de la Comunidad/Friends of the Community to address problems brought about by this radical change in the town’s population. Amigos, as the group is called locally, has worked to provide support, education and recreation activities to bring long-term and newly arrived residents together and to mitigate many of the original problems. In addition to a village-wide community Thanksgiving dinner the group sponsors each fall, they have facilitated a number of new services including English and Spanish classes, cultural workshops, orientation packets for newcomers, immigration workshops, a support group for those in cross-cultural marriages, a soccer team, and the hiring of bilingual and bicultural employees in many local businesses and in legal, health care and educational organizations. Along with these efforts of Amigos, according to McNeilly et al. (1997), special preschool classes have been started to help

4 Barbara Ornes, Norwalk Village Clerk personal communication December 2003.
immigrant children prepare for kindergarten, a non-profit legal service is working with volunteers to assist immigrants in legal matters, churches have recruited bilingual clergy to serve the area, and a free primary health clinic has opened in the community. Wisconsin Rural Partners (1998) also mentions the development of a village housing ordinance, the creation of a community recreational facility, opening of Latino owned businesses in the town, and language classes and distribution of Spanish-English dictionaries for medical personnel and clergy. A decade after the original immigrants came to Norwalk, there has been a shift in the types of immigrants working in the plant. Most of the workers now have families living in town and are more involved in the community than the workers were in the early 1990’s (Jenkins et al. 2003). Because of financial difficulties at the plant that caused a temporary closing in 2001, many workers looked for and found other jobs in the area and elsewhere, but the plant still employs approximately 100 workers (Jenkins et al. 2003, Martinez 2001).

The city studied in this paper, by contrast, is experiencing more gradual change. Many long-term residents do not even perceive that a change is happening. I spoke with one local official on December 1, 2003, and asked him about the increases in the Hispanic population. I was told, “There are no Hispanics in town.” When I mentioned the census data, he assured me that, if there were people living in the county who identified themselves as Hispanic, they were, undoubtedly, migrant workers hired seasonally by the orchards.\(^5\) The invisibility of this group of residents can be seen as both a blessing and a curse. Long-term residents are more likely to recognize the uniqueness and the personhood of individuals coming into the community – more likely to welcome them and to help them to adapt to life in their new locality. They are less likely to view the newcomers as a threat to the homogeneity of the community if they do not perceive

\(^5\) Director, County Economic Development Corporation.
them as part of a large group of new citizens moving to the city. On the other hand, if the newcomers are invisible, their needs can be ignored.

Methodology
This research explores how Latin American immigrant women who have moved to the one small city in the Midwest view themselves and their lives, particularly in the context of their interactions in their new community. After attempting to locate all immigrant women over the age of eighteen who were born in Latin America and now live within a fifteen mile radius of the center of the city, I scheduled a series of semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Sixteen women were contacted and all agreed to be interviewed. I also interviewed four second-generation Latinas. Although those interviews informed my work, this study limits itself to results from first-generation immigrants.

Interviews were conducted at places of the participants’ choice which included their homes, a local restaurant, an English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom, and the local United Migrant Opportunity Services (UMOS) office. One interview was conducted over the telephone. Participants chose their language of preference for the interview. I have studied Spanish but am not fluent in the language, so volunteer translators were used for the Spanish language interviews. Interviews were conducted individually, and each began with an invitation to the participant to choose a name for herself by which I would identify her. In order to maintain confidentiality, actual names of the women participating were not used. The interview process consisted of three parts; a non-structured “chat” time focused on each woman’s concerns and unprompted ideas, a semi-structured segment where the participant was asked to address specific
questions, and a follow-up time during which the participant was encouraged to discuss her ideas about the study, the community, her personal situation or any other topic she felt might have a bearing on the research being done. Specific questions asked were open-ended to encourage women to add information not specifically queried. Interview lengths ranged from one-half hour to four and one-half hours. I took notes during each interview and also tape recorded all except two of the interviews.

Findings

Demographics

Of thirteen women interviewed so far, seven were born in Mexico, two in El Salvador, three in Uruguay, and one in Guatemala. The average age of the participants is 31.7, the range 24-40. Of the women from Mexico, three are members of one extended family. An additional extended family includes two women from Mexico and one from El Salvador. None of the other women interviewed are related, but two women from Uruguay were friends before moving to this community. The women represent seven states in Mexico, two departments each in El Salvador and Uruguay, and one department in Guatemala. When asked about their native towns, one described hers as “a tiny place,” four as “a town” or “a village,” six as “a city” and two as a “big” or “capital city.” (For the future it might be useful to have numbers here. Data on immigrants often lists the population of the town the migrants come from. These data are also available in studies on remittances.)

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6 Due to scheduling difficulties, three of the interviews have not yet been completed. Consequently, the results and conclusions drawn at this time are preliminary and will be amended to reflect final results. I have talked briefly with the three women still to be interviewed, and have no reason to believe that their responses will differ significantly from those recorded here.
Only one woman came here directly from her home in Guatemala. The other women had moved an average of three times. Three women from one extended family had originally come to the Chicago area, three women from the other family had moved through the Los Angeles area, and two of the women from Uruguay had previously lived in Argentina. There was, otherwise, no uniformity in the women’s migration patterns. Areas listed as prior residences included Illinois, California, Colorado, Texas, Indiana, New Jersey, Iowa, Argentina, and several cities in Mexico. Two families had previously lived in other cities in Wisconsin – Madison, Stoughton, and Norwalk. The women gave dates of 1974 to 2003 for first entering the U.S. The average year of first entry was 1994.1; the median was 1997. They first moved to this area beginning in 1991 and continuing through 2003. The average number of years they have lived in this community is 4.38; the median is 3.

Eleven women are married or partnered; one is single; one is divorced. Eleven have children living at home. One woman has two children under the age of eighteen living with relatives in Mexico; two others have children eighteen or older living outside of their homes but in the United States. The ages of the twenty-one children living with their mothers range from nine months to fifteen years with an average age of 6.3 years and a median of six years. Eleven of the thirteen women surveyed have additional family members living in the United States. Of those, eight have family members living within the study area. Family members include sisters (4), brothers (3), adult stepchildren (2), nephew (1), and stepmother (1).

Study participants found their way to this Midwestern city in similar ways. Almost all followed a relative or a friend. Eight of the women came because of their husbands’ jobs; one followed
her father; another, her sister. Two women came on the recommendation of a friend who was already living here. One was recruited by a labor contractor. One woman who came with her husband, then moved away when he did, later returned after she was divorced.

Of those who followed a family member to the area, four families were originally in the migrant stream, and worked seasonally in nearby orchards. Three moved from Chicago to work in a local business. One woman married an American Peace Corps volunteer, and returned with him to his family’s home. One woman’s husband had previously lived in the area while he attended the university. The husband of another found work on an area farm when the meatpacking plant at Norwalk closed temporarily in 2001.

Nine of the women work full-time outside the home. One woman has both a full-time and a part-time job. Of the women who work, six work in factories, two in warehouses, and one at a fast-food restaurant. One additional woman is a full-time student at a technical college. Most work in the city, but three have jobs outside of town – fourteen, forty-five, and sixty-six miles away. The student drives thirty miles each way to school. Of the three women who neither work nor attend school full-time, one is looking for a job. The other two live outside the city, do not drive, and have young children at home.

Narratives

A major purpose of this study was to give voice to the participants. I wanted to discover what factors had facilitated their adaptation to life in their new home, and what ideas they could share with me for improving the city’s welcome to new immigrants. I asked first about their
impressions of the town and found them generally favorable. Most often mentioned (10) were the peacefulness and friendliness of the community. As Lidubina said, “This is a small, peaceful community, like we’re used to. It’s a good place to raise children. We feel more comfortable living here, because there’s not so much danger as big cities. We feel more secure having our children grow up here. It’s good.” Sarai commented, “It’s very good here, very friendly. They try to help the other people even when they’re new. It’s a very strong, integrated community here.” Rosario explained that the cost of living and quality of the schools had influenced her decision to live here, “I was living in California with my kids, and we just couldn’t make it. I only made $200 a week, and the rent was $500 a month. It just wasn’t enough. And the schools were really bad. I told my kids that we could move back to anywhere we had been – New Jersey, Colorado, Indiana, or here. We should just pick one. And this is a really nice town – beautiful. It’s a good community with good schools. So we came back.”

Mentioned by others were the area’s natural beauty (3), and lack of discrimination (1). One woman, originally from a suburb of Mexico City, felt that it was too peaceful, “It’s a quiet town, calm, sort of sad. Nothing to do except go to Madison.”

In describing the communities they left in their native country, the women’s answers varied as much as the areas they were describing: “It’s a pretty big place – 25,000 people, maybe more – but very friendly. We had more time there to spend with the neighborhood. But the city has drugs now, it didn’t before.” “Oaxaca – it’s beautiful.” “It’s a small neighborhood on the edge

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7 Bold numbers in parentheses indicate the number of women offering that response. Because some women gave more than one response to a question, the total number of responses does not add up to the total number of women interviewed.

8 Names have been changed.

9 Some responses were given in English, others are translated from Spanish. I do not differentiate between them in the text.
of a city. The houses are much closer together than here. The people are poor, but the culture is rich.” “I don’t remember a lot, because we left when I was a kid. We lived in a village; then we moved to a city. My mother worked, and I stayed home to take care of my brother from the time I was about eight years old. I remember doing laundry in the river on the rocks.” “It’s a small city with about fifty percent native indigenous people and fifty percent mestizos or Latinos.” “A tiny place, a ranchito – there are no stores. To go shopping, we have to go to the nearby city.” “It’s a city. It used to be nice, but now there are too many people.” “I used to take care of the vines in the vineyard there.” “A town outside of the capital city. Just a little bit bigger than this one.” “Yes, it’s a big city – it’s the national capital.” “A beautiful city – I love the beach!”

Factors the participants felt had helped them to adapt more easily to life in the rural Midwest included, “a lot of help from the people” (3), Job Service (2), ESL classes (2), “funding for daycare so I can go to school and learn English” (1), “lower prices for food, clothing and rent than in Illinois” (1), “spring!” (1), “having a friend who already lived here” (1), “a good job” (1), and “a doctor at the clinic who speaks Spanish” (1). Two women noted that the director of the ESL and adult education program had taken a special interest in the Latino/a population and had helped many of them. Two others mentioned that the director of the United Migrant Opportunity Services office had been very helpful. Frida said, “The community itself makes it easier because it’s easygoing. It’s a small place, and I find it easier to communicate with people. I find it very comfortable.” Isabel mentioned a nurse at the clinic and a Spanish teacher at a high school who had helped her family by translating for doctor’s appointments and parent teacher conferences. Elena spoke of people at a bank who had been helpful. Edith said, “I’ve been out and people have talked to me in Spanish, and I’ve been surprised. When I try to ask in English, and it’s
hard, and they talk to me in Spanish! Ay!” Lidubina felt that, “Some know how [to speak Spanish], but they don’t want to talk to us. We won’t hurt you; it’s ok.” Two participants answered, “Nothing makes it easier; it’s just hard!”

The obstacle to adaptation mentioned most often was the women’s difficulty with language and communication (9). As Isabel said, “Being able to express myself is the biggest problem.” Frida concurred, “When I go shopping it is hard for me to communicate because I don’t speak English, and their Spanish is very limited – maybe a word or two sometimes. And for the driver’s license, it was hard because I didn’t understand what was required – everything that was needed. It was hard taking the written test, and on the driving test I was nervous – something new and not knowing where to go or how to get around.” Monica agreed, “English! Everything is in English, so I don’t go anywhere.” When asked what was especially hard for her, Edith said, “Applications for jobs. I didn’t even know how to ask for the application – and couldn’t fill one out. I knew I had to work, but how could I?” All except the two most recent immigrants have studied English in a formal program, either in the ESL program offered through the technical college outreach classroom locally (9), or prior to moving to the area (2). Most find it difficult to find time for classes and studying between their work schedules and caring for their families. Currently eight women are studying in the local program, and one participant is teaching English to others. The two women who came to the community within the past few months are trying to learn on their own, although they have expressed interest in attending ESL classes. Monica said, “My husband works all the time, and I can’t drive, so I study English at home. I have audio and video tapes that I use to study, and I try to watch films in English. My daughter’s learning, too.”
Four participants told me that lack of understanding of the culture is also a major obstacle for the women, and four others mentioned their sense of isolation and problems with transportation. Sara – “When I came we were really isolated living on a farm. I couldn’t walk to town, and I thought I was going to die.” Zuleidy – “The only other person I get to talk to is [at ESL class]. It’s for such a short time, and we don’t see each other that often.” Lidubina – “Transportation is hard. Here there are only cars or the taxi, and both are very expensive.” Monica – “I don’t see anybody because I don’t know English, and I don’t drive. So I just stay home with [her child] and don’t go anywhere.”

Cold Wisconsin weather was a shock to three of the participants. Lorena told me, “Winter! Winter is very difficult to adapt to. Especially when you come here the first time, and you have children. You don’t know how to get ready for it, and they don’t have the clothes they need to stay warm.” “Some people come from Los Angeles or somewhere else warm, and the first snow, they’re in the ditch! Sometimes they come and buy a car, but they don’t know how to get it ready for winter. They either freeze the water or leave the gas tank empty and it freezes. Sometimes they don’t know to put new tires on the car for winter, and that’s dangerous.”

Of course, being far away from family members makes adaptation difficult (4). This is particularly so for one participant who had to leave two of her children in Mexico with relatives, “It’s really hard that I can’t bring my children here. I wish I could change the border to help make the world united.” Other obstacles to adaptation included higher than expected costs (1), lack of ability to buy the sorts of food they’re accustomed to (1), lack of time and opportunity to study English (1), and people who aren’t welcoming (2). One participant said, “Most people
here are very nice, but some are unfriendly. A few are either racist or they’re afraid that people will take their jobs – or maybe they’re just not educated to show respect for other people.”

Isabel told me of an especially hurtful thing that happened to her when she worked at a factory in Madison. One day, one of the American workers had a birthday. She brought a big cake and shared it with all the other Americans in the cafeteria at lunch time, but didn’t offer a piece to any of the Uruguayans who were there. “Sometimes people are a little cold, don’t you think? If they could be a little nicer so I don’t feel like such a stranger.”

The women told me there were many things they just did not do because of their lack of confidence in their English ability. Four participants mentioned having problems in stores, banks, restaurants and other businesses. Frida said, “Yes, usually, I’m afraid of doing something because I feel they won’t be able to understand me. So I don’t do certain things – sometimes the most simple things – going to the bank, going to McDonald’s.” Zuleidy had a similar comment, “I never ask for anything at the store. I’d like to buy things from the bakery and the deli, but I don’t because you have to ask for them. But last week I became brave enough to ask for some potatoes. It was the first time I actually asked for something!” Monica said, “I don’t do anything because I don’t know English. My husband has to do everything for me; he even has to buy my clothes.”

Two women said they often avoid speaking to people. Lorena told me about a job offer she had to work as a receptionist, but she didn’t take it. “I don’t feel confident enough of my English to do that.” Elena worries that she might misunderstand directions or answers to her questions at work. Isabel is frustrated that she is unable to attend parent-teacher conferences. “I’m not able to
go because I can’t communicate. We have to schedule them when my husband can go instead.

We work different shifts, so we can’t go together.” Isabel is also afraid to drive to Madison to see her brother. “I can’t go to Madison, because I might get lost, and I can’t ask for directions.” Edith and her husband are buying a house, but they’re worried that they don’t understand English well enough to avoid problems. “When you buy a house they have on the paper things that are wrong with it – we wouldn’t understand that kind of language.”

Even more worrisome is that five of the participants avoid getting medical care they or their children may need. Lidubina told me, “I don’t go to the dentist, because I don’t speak enough English.” She tried asking the dentist to write down his instructions so she could take them home and have her husband translate them for her, but she was very embarrassed about it, and doesn’t want to go back. Isabel said, “I don’t go to the doctor for the simple reason that I can’t communicate. Going to the doctor is terrible. Sometimes I can take someone with me who speaks both Spanish and English, but if I don’t have anyone to go with me, I don’t go.” Frida said, “I don’t take much medical care because of the language.” Sara and her husband waited two years after they moved here to start their family. “I waited to have children until I knew how to speak English well, because I didn’t want to have anyone translating for me when it comes to that kind of privacy.”

The medical center has several translators they can call on to help patients who need translation. But Edith, Rosario, Zuleidy, Lidubina, Elena, and Isabel spoke of feeling uncomfortable at medical appointments even when they had a translator there. Lidubina – “It’s hard to say everything I need to say when I go to the doctor for my physical, because someone is there
translating for me.” Isabel – “It’s complicated and embarrassing because you want to say how you feel, but don’t want to embarrass other people.” Edith had a problem during her pregnancy because she couldn’t make the doctor understand her about a pain she was having. “I felt frustrated that I couldn’t tell him how I felt.” In fact, eight of the twelve women spoke of instances when they had felt uncomfortable because of the lack of privacy that comes of needing to speak through a translator. As Frida said, “There are situations when I just need to communicate something private.”

All of the women mentioned times they’ve been embarrassed because of their lack of skill in English. They employ a number of strategies to keep their spirits up. Six said the most important thing was to keep studying, keep working, and keep trying to learn English better. Frida, Rosario and Lidubina ask people to write things down for them so they can have someone else translate, or they can look them up. Frida says, “At work, for example, I have the hardest time many times. I have to get them to repeat everything over and over until I get it. Sometimes I have them write it down so I can get my [electronic] translator because I want to be able to understand everything they’re trying to communicate to me.” Elena has felt angry with herself for not knowing more English. “When I don’t understand something, they’ll just say ‘It’s not important.’ But it is important to me.” “There have been some times when people said to me ‘Speak English, please,’ but I couldn’t. That was embarrassing.” Rosario says, when she can’t make herself understood, “I just try to forget it, not think about it.” Lorena reminds herself that it’s hard to become fluent in a new language. “I say, ‘I’m bilingual and this is my second language, so it’s ok if I say some things wrong.’” Isabel reassures herself, “I think of ways I can learn to communicate. I know I’ll get there eventually.”
Santisteban and Mitrani (2003) and Pipher (2002) discuss the negative effects a differential in acculturation between children and parents can have on parental authority, especially if the children have to translate for their parents. I asked the participants in this study whether they felt their children were less likely to show respect for them because of their difficulties with English. Isabel, Zuleidy and Rosario all told me their children spoke much better English than they did. Zuleidy and Rosario have daughters in high school who often translate for their mothers. Neither mother felt there had been any problems with this arrangement. Isabel’s situation was different. She sometimes needs her eight-year-old son to translate for her. When I asked if this had caused any problems, she said, “Yes, exactly correct, right on the dot! It is very hard because he gets frustrated because his mom doesn’t speak English. Sometimes he even says things that are hurtful. He doesn’t want to speak Spanish around other people because he thinks people will discriminate against him. He only wants to speak English.” Sara mentions that, even though she tries to speak Spanish with her children so they will grow up bilingual, they prefer to speak English and will usually answer in English. Lorena agrees:

My kid goes to the daycare. She won’t speak Spanish! She’s been with a babysitter since she was six weeks old, and it’s easier for her to speak in English. I talk to her in Spanish; she answers in English. I really try hard, but it won’t work. And I think she’s just being a little lazy because English is easier for her and Spanish she’s got to think about it before she talks. I mean she speaks Spanish, but very, very little. But when you speak Spanish to her, she understands everything.

Five of the participants mentioned problems in schools and daycare settings. Notes and notices that come home in English are difficult or impossible to read (3) so parents often miss school
activities or don’t know to send permission slips, money for special activities, extra clothing for
the playground, etc. Two mothers mentioned how hard it was for upper elementary students to
be used as translators for other students and parents. Rosario – “Using children in the school to
translate too much isn’t good. There should be at least one person there who speaks Spanish.
When kids have to go and help all the time, they get behind in their work.” Lorena concurred,
“To do that sometimes, I think, is good, but for the whole year it was too much. _____ [fifth
grade student] got behind in her own work, and could never be with her friends or do anything
by herself. Pretty soon, she just got frustrated.” She also noted another problem students were
having at initial school entrance:

The preschool program here is for disabled children only, and Head Start is full. Students
who need to start school but speak only Spanish don’t have any way to learn English
before kindergarten. But the teachers in the school don’t speak Spanish, so the kids go
and can’t speak to anyone, and no one can understand them. They just cry and cry. Then
the school puts them back in the preschool program at that age so they can learn English.
But that way they lose a year. It would be better if they could go to preschool before they
start kindergarten. I think not knowing English is a disability, but the school says it’s not.

According to Zuleidy, though, things do get better with time, “The first day _____ [her daughter]
went to school and some girls said ‘Hi.’ She didn’t answer them, and the girls laughed at her. I
felt so bad. But now she’s part of the crowd.”

Language is also an issue for the women and their families at work (3). Zuleidy – “My husband
had an opportunity to advance at his job, but, although he is able to speak and understand
English now, he’s not yet able to write it or read it well. So he couldn’t get a better job.” Bills
and paperwork in general cause stress for at least three of the families. Edith says, “All the bills come in English, so we can’t be sure they’re right – what they’re taking out.” Isabel agrees, “Paperwork in general is complicated. When I go to the store, I can write checks and such, but I can’t understand the bills and more complicated paperwork.” Four participants again mentioned problems in gaining access to medical care, especially with the costs and paperwork involved. Lidubina said, “The most difficult thing is medical, because I don’t have insurance.” Even with medical insurance, Edith found deductibles and co-pays can be overwhelming. “I had to have an operation. We had insurance, but we still have to pay a lot.” Two women, whose families live outside of town, again mentioned transportation and isolation as a problem, and one other participant just said she had “lots of problems.”

Participants use a variety of coping mechanisms to solve or minimize their problems. Lupe and Frida mentioned the value of networking with friends. Frida elaborated, “Sometimes when we go somewhere, everyone speaks just a little, ‘I understood this,’ ‘I understood this,’ and with a dictionary we sometimes put the conversation together. And I use my electronic translator. This is my companion!” Lidubina and Sarai have husbands who are more proficient in the language than they are, so they often ask them for help. Lidubina asks her doctor, her dentist and her daughters’ teachers to write notes for her husband to read rather than telling her things directly. Zuleidy asks her daughter to accompany her “to the store or to get a haircut.” Frida says community people have been very helpful, “It depends on the person and the environment. When I go to the bank, I feel more comfortable now talking to them. People help me. They are open, and that makes it easier to tell them what I need.” Monica recognizes her biggest challenge right now is learning English, and she’s trying her best to do so. And Lorena reminds
herself even winter’s not so bad if you look on the bright side, “Maybe if you had good weather, you wouldn’t have a good job, so I’m very happy with what I have. I just wear more clothes and snow boots. Snow boots all day! I cover myself up 24/7!”

Participants are involved in a number of activities within the community. The most often listed was church (7), although, as Edith and Isabel pointed out, that can be frustrating because, “it’s all in English.”

Four women spoke of sports activities, listing swimming, playing soccer and basketball, and going to the recreation center to exercise. Others mentioned watching films and movies (5), participating in activities at their children’s schools (3), spending time in the park with their families in the summer (3), and having friends over (2). Two enjoy volunteer activities. Sara – “I like to volunteer. I volunteered in my son’s classroom. I’m pretty involved with the school and with the church. I taught Vacation Bible School this summer – that was pretty neat!” Lorena – “Mostly I like to translate for people and to help them find their way. I take them to their doctor’s appointments and to the school, and I help them fill out forms and understand all the things they need to know.” Also mentioned were having barbecues (1) and going to ESL classes (2), the store (1) and out to eat (1). Isabel said, “We get together with our friends on Christmas, New Year’s, and birthdays. We don’t do things as often during the winter, but in the summer, we have barbecues, go to the park, go to a lake to swim. Even when we don’t get together, we call each other at least once a week to talk.”

The women spoke of the activities they were accustomed to doing in their home countries as being similar in many ways. Three spoke of attending church, and five mentioned sports

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10 Four of the women are Roman Catholic, two Methodist, and one said that she had “visited the Jehovah’s Witness church a few times, because they were the friendliest.”
activities such as exercising, swimming, and playing basketball, volleyball and soccer. Frida said, “We had friends there. We went to the beach. We had a life out in the open.” Lidubina and her friends “used to go hiking in the mountains,” and Zuleidy told me she and her family would often “prepare a picnic and go sit by the waterfall on the river to eat it.” She misses being able to spend more of her time outside, “just to cook outside or work in the yard.” Elena misses going camping and fishing and being “in nature” more often. Five women said visiting with members of their extended families was an important part of their lives, and they miss being able to do that here. Lupe said, “I miss Christmas and New Year’s celebrations and the birthdays of my mom and dad and to be with my whole family.” Lidubina remembered, “We went to visit my grandma on Sundays, went to Mass, talked to friends.” Six of the participants agreed with Sarai that, in their home countries, “You’ve got more time to spend with your family or your friends.” Sara explained:

I miss meeting people and talking to people. People there walked more and talked to each other. If you go to the market, you’re always going to meet people you know, or to church, or to the post office, but here it seems like everybody’s alone – more into their work. They get into their vehicles, go do what they need to do and get back. They don’t take the time to be a little more, I don’t know, to talk to people. That part I do miss.

Sarai feels the pace of life here is often so fast that families get neglected. “For me, it’s more important to spend more time with my children. I need the money from working, but I don’t care so much about having a lot of money. I want to spend more time with my family.” Lupe, Edith and Lorena miss foods from home, and Isabel misses “being able to express myself well.”
Participants bring many skills and talents with them. Four women told me they “love to cook, and would like to share that with others.” One said, “My father was a grand chef, one of the best in Uruguay, and he taught me to cook when I was very young. If I could cook twelve hours a day, I would never be bored.” Four enjoy working with children. Lupe would “love to work in a daycare, or be a teacher,” if her English skills were better. Elena enjoys organizing get-togethers with food and music. Lorena and Rosario saw their ability to speak both Spanish and English as an asset. Rosario is helping some of the people she works with to learn some Spanish. Sara and Lorena enjoy helping people learn to solve their problems. Sara says, “I’m a people person. I like to talk to people and make them feel good about themselves. I feel that the skill I’m going to need most of all is to talk with people and empower them so they themselves can realize that they can do it.” As Lorena says, “The talent I can teach people is “never give up! There’s always ways to help people solve their problems. Today it’s you that needs help, tomorrow it might be me.” Other talents in the group are bookkeeping (1) and embroidering (1). Sarai would also like to “tell people about my country.”

When asked what, in particular, they could do to help the community, eight women expressed frustration. Lupe said, “I want to do lots of things, but the barrier of English won’t let me.” Frida agreed, “I don’t think there’s much that I can do.” Edith spoke of how overwhelmed she is with working, mothering her young son, and trying to learn English at the same time. One woman told me she’s been frustrated because of a family in her neighborhood that “doesn’t work and doesn’t clean up around their house.” She thought maybe she could think of a way to work on cleaning up the neighborhood herself. Lorena hopes to open an international grocery store and restaurant. Zuleidy would like to cook authentic Mexican food for people. Sara sees a role
for herself in helping newcomers make the transition to the community. “I’d like to help people
who are here from other countries. They might need translating, or help to learn English so they
can do things themselves. If they need anything, they might not be as fortunate as I was to know
where to go.” One woman is concerned her skills might not be welcome, though. “When I
graduate, I’d like to work with the elderly, and I know there aren’t many Hispanic elderly people
around here. I love working with the elderly, but I’m afraid the younger generation might not,
you know, they might not be able to take me as seriously since I’m from another country.”

I asked the participants whether they had any specific recommendations for things the
community could do to ease the transition for people who are moving here from abroad. Their
ideas included:

**Schools and daycare (3)** – “It would help if things came home in Spanish, too, and not
just in English.” “There should be a preschool program for children to learn English before
kindergarten so they don’t have to go back a grade.” “They could have somebody at the school
who speaks Spanish – at least one person who could go from school to school to help.”

**Resources in Spanish (3)** – “It would be good if more places had things in Spanish, too,
like the Department of Motor Vehicles, insurance companies, banks, and schools. Especially
when people first come, there’s so many things that they have to do, and it would make an easier
life for them so they could understand that they’re not alone.” “I wish that there were more
books and videos in Spanish.”

**Cultural center (3)** – “It would be nice to have a place where people who want to know
about other cultures could meet to exchange ideas and give their point of view and learn more
about each other. Now that we’re getting more people from other parts of the world, I think that
something like that could be very beneficial for the whole community.”

**Attitudes toward newcomers (3)** – “Some people could be more friendly. There are
some people here who, because you’re Spanish, they treat you differently.” “I just hope that
they’re not racist and can make it all equal, instead of not to talk to us because we’re from a
different culture.”

**English as a Second Language Program (1)** – Continue the ESL program and maybe
expand the offerings.

**Mexican food store (1)** – “I wish there was a Mexican food store.”

**Discussion**

Studies cited by Kaniasty and Norris (2000) found that “Hispanics were most likely to request
help from no one and to ‘suffer in silence’” (Weeks and Cuellar 1981), and that “Hispanic
women reported receiving the least support of all groups, particularly in the domains of
They conclude, “The more help they needed, the more stress they were under, the less they asked
for, and the less they got.” Aranda, Castaneda, Lee and Sobel (2001) note that, for Mexican-
American women “traditional gender role scripts” increase both the levels of stress within the
family and the incidence of depression. Pipher (2002) tells us that, in general, “refugees try to fit
in and usually don’t complain, even when things are seriously wrong.” Because the interviewer
was a member of the majority population, there is a concern that negative perceptions and
problems may have been underreported. In addition, the very isolation of some women who
should have been part of the study may have kept them hidden and unrepresented. As noted,
too, these are preliminary findings, based on the responses of just over eighty percent of the
women in the known population. A more complete report will be made when all interviews have
been conducted and group meetings with participants have been held to discuss and further
develop the responses given to the researcher.

At this time, though, many of the findings in this study echo those found in the literature. As
Kandel and Cromartie (2003) and Deufel (2003) note, settlement patterns of immigrants from
Latin American countries are shifting as more Hispanics move into rural areas of the South and
Midwest. Frey (1996) and Deufel (2003) both report that these shifts in internal migration are
happening, primarily, in response to economic needs in the receiving communities. Dalla,
Cramer & Stanek (2002) state that migrant populations are changing to include more families
rather than single males, and migration patterns are shifting as these families put down roots and
stay much longer in communities. Settles (2001) comments on the prevalence of chain migration
within the population, which brings groups of families and friends to the same area.

These trends were borne out by my findings. Most newcomers in this study followed family
members or friends who came to the area because of job opportunities. Twelve of the sixteen
women found were in one of the extended family or friendship groups,¹¹ and almost half¹² of the
residents of Hispanic origin were under the age of eighteen (US Census 2000). The public
school census taken in September 2003 counted 20 students who identified themselves as
Hispanic. Of the thirteen participants interviewed so far in this study, all but one have a
husband, partner or children living with them. They have a total of twenty-one children living at

¹¹ Although three of the sixteen women found have not yet been interviewed, I have talked with
them, and do have some information about them.
¹² Twenty-two of forty-seven residents were under the age of 18.
home; eight of these are younger than school-age. Although the question was not asked in my interviews, four of the women interviewed volunteered that they had bought homes in the community. This supports the idea that they intend to become long-term residents.

Residential segregation, as described by Kandel and Cromartie (2003) and Frey (1996), does not appear to be an issue in the city studied. Although I did not do a statistical analysis of residence patterns, I did find that participants lived throughout the city, and were not clustered in any particular areas. This may be a result of the small size of the community, the fact that all neighborhoods are close enough to allow easy visiting between family and friends, and the availability of affordable housing in many different parts of the city. Bernal and Enchautegui-de-Jesus (1990) found that 62.6% of Latino/as in the United States were originally from Mexico, and 13.8% were from Central or South American countries. My study showed a more equal mix, however, with Mexico sending 50% of the women, Uruguay 31.25%, El Salvador 12.5%, and Guatemala 6.25%. Kandel and Cromartie (2003) found that, while 2000 census data showed only 5.5% of the non-metro population of the United States was Hispanic, Hispanics accounted for 25% of the total non-metro population growth from 1990 to 2000. According to the 1990 and 2000 census data for the city studied here, Hispanics represented 21% of the population growth, although they are still slightly less than 1% of the population.

13 I was told that within the past year, eight additional women from Mexico, Uruguay, Brazil and Honduras had lived in the community, but had moved prior to the beginning of my study. Of these women, two returned to Mexico, one returned to Brazil, two moved to Spain, and one each moved to Pennsylvania, Utah, and Madison, Wisconsin. Because I do not have more information about these women, it is not clear whether they represent a sub-population that spends summers working in the area, or whether there were other factors during the year that caused many newcomers to choose to leave the area. Although details about these women are beyond the scope of this study, it would probably be fruitful to research these questions more fully.
Phinney (2003), Settles (2001), and San Juan (1994) all discuss the importance of the established local population in determining the degree of acceptance and inclusion the newcomers will be granted in the community. Deufel (2003) found that in rural communities, the need for the social and economic capital of new workers usually outweighs concerns local residents might have about in-migrating populations. He also found that the ineligibility of most immigrants for social welfare programs combined with their positive contributions to the labor force tended to bias reactions of political institutions in a positive direction. However, he notes, in the rural Midwest, with its tradition of greater homogeneity, communities often perceive newcomers as more of a threat. Deufel (2003) asserts that the three common responses to immigrants moving into a community are, “get rid of them, change them, or welcome and incorporate them.” He maintains that the amount of social capital, in the form of nonprofit agencies, volunteers, and foundations, available to help the community meet the needs of the newcomers often controls which of these responses is applied to a particular situation. Reitz (2002) states that there is a different dynamic, and the four features of the host society most important to the reception of immigrants are, “pre-existing ethnic or race relations within the host population, differences in labor markets and related institutions, impact of government policies and programs, including immigration policy, policies for immigrant integration and policies for the regulation of social institutions, and the changing nature of international boundaries.” He states, “The extent of pre-existing diversity and the extent to which existing groups share characteristics with new groups is the most critical starting point.” Fimmen et al. (1998) hold that the factor with the largest impact on immigrant reception is the size of the community relative to the size of its employment base. According to the authors, small communities with large employment bases experience relatively more disruption from new immigrants.
My study did not measure attitudes of long-term residents to the newcomers. Participants’ comments about their feelings of inclusion or exclusion, though, do give a picture of their perceptions. In describing the community, three women mentioned times they had felt uncomfortable because they perceived they were being excluded or treated differently based on their ethnicity. Two of the three qualified their statements by saying “many people” or “most people” are “nice,” and that very few interactions had been problematic. On the other hand, eight women used the words “friendly” or “welcoming” to describe majority residents. Examining the data collected, it is interesting to note that, with the exception of business dealings and ESL classes, only three women mentioned substantial on-going interactions with members of the majority population. One additional participant told of a close friendship with a neighbor, but said the neighbor has moved, so “we don’t see each other anymore.” It is impossible to draw conclusions about the attitudes of the majority residents based on this data, but it is safe to say that although most participants in this study feel welcomed, some have experienced uncomfortable situations, and very few feel themselves to be fully integrated into the majority community. Positive efforts to increase their feeling of inclusion and acceptance are needed.

Participants felt supported by some community organizations. Most of the women have taken English lessons through the technical college outreach program in town, and several mentioned help they had received from United Migrant Opportunity Services (UMOS) and the county Job Center office. These organizations address two of the most pressing concerns of the immigrants.

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14 These three women have lived in the community for twelve, eleven and seven years, respectively.
– learning English and finding jobs. Shumway and Cooke (1998) found that, in Mexican-American families, although the decision to migrate is usually not under the control of the woman, child care responsibilities were more likely to fall on her, limiting her access to jobs and restricting her integration into the new community. They state that limited proficiency in English has twice the negative effect on job opportunities for Latinas as it does for Latinos, and, because women’s jobs are more often found by networking, moving to a new community further increases the likelihood a woman will not be able to find a job. Of the thirteen women interviewed in this study, eleven had had no instruction in English before they moved to the community. Since arriving, eleven have taken advantage of the ESL classes offered here. All who have been involved said the program had been helpful and should be continued – one suggested it could be expanded.

It is not unreasonable to suggest that more residents from the majority population might want to study Spanish, too. Not only would doing so open a window to friendships with the increasing number of immigrants in our own community and to more knowledge of a language group that is becoming widespread throughout our nation, it would also give us a better appreciation for how hard these newcomers are working as they strive to learn English. At the least, we may want to keep an English-Spanish dictionary available at our businesses to help with transactions there, and to learn a few words of the language with which we can welcome newcomers.

Several participants expressed frustration in working with educational institutions. This is important to note. As Fimmen et al. (1998) caution, schools are often surprised by an influx of children with special language or cultural needs. Reitz (2002) tells us that the impact of
educational differences is a major determinant of the success of the immigrant population – a
more powerful determinant than even labor market structure. Feagin and Feagin (1996) remind
us of the 1974 Supreme Court ruling stating that being able to understand classroom instruction
is a civil right, and must not be compromised. Rumbaut (1997) asserts that the first three years
of a child’s schooling in the new community are critical, and Pipher (2002) reminds us of the
many challenges an immigrant child faces on starting school:

Before their first day of school, many children from traditional cultures have never been
away from their mothers for even an hour. At school, they may feel far from home.
Everything may be different – the language, customs, the colors of the people, the
clothes, the food, even the play.

At the same time, we are in a period of budget constraints on education, and schools that have
not had experience with children from immigrant populations are challenged to develop the tools
and the expertise to meet their needs. Teachers and administrators, too, are frustrated by the
language barriers, not only in working with the students, but, also, in trying to communicate and
work with students’ parents. It often seems immigrant parents are less involved in their
children’s schooling, too, which can lead to further discouragement for school personnel.

It is essential, though, to find a solution for this problem. Immigrant populations are growing
throughout our country, and the growth is becoming more evident in the rural Midwest. Pipher
(2002) states that one of every five schoolchildren in the United States was either born abroad or
has parents who were. Reitz (2002) found that when immigrant and second generation children
are not provided with a way to integrate into the larger population, they begin to identify with
oppositional sub-cultures. Hurtado (1997) shows that immigrant parents are as likely as other parents to be involved in school activities if their work obligations are considered when scheduling meetings, they are helped to become familiar with the school culture, provision is made for language translation, and they feel welcomed into the school.

In their study of a rural Illinois town, Fimmen et al. (1998) noted that the largest changes that had to be made when the town experienced a large increase in its Hispanic population were in the schools. They found that a bilingual preschool program, English as a Second Language instruction and in-service instruction to help classroom teachers and staff learn more about second language instruction and cross cultural understanding became necessary parts of the district’s role in educating the children of the community. These additions should be seen as alternatives which offer a better education to all the students of the district rather than as an added burden to the school district and the community. Indeed, according to Maceri (2003) researchers at Dartmouth and George Mason University have found that studying in bilingual schools promotes greater agility of thought and improved learning across the subject areas, and children who have had the opportunity to study a second language develop greater mental agility and do better on standardized tests. Maceri cites the popularity of 271 dual language schools across the country and the existence of federal funding to help initiate the programs.

Another area mentioned several times by the participants of this study was a lack of information for new residents in a language they can understand. Newcomers noted that area businesses had been helpful, but language and communication problems often prevented them from knowing how to obtain, sometimes from even realizing the necessity for, such things as car insurance,
bank accounts, drivers’ licenses, winter clothes, and fair rental lease agreements. Norwalk remedied this problem for newcomers to their town by compiling bilingual orientation packets and distributing them through businesses hiring immigrants (WI Rural 1998). An orientation packet such as this could be a help to all new residents of this city, and could provide an opportunity for merchants and providers of services to introduce themselves to those moving to the area.

A few years ago, a young professional and her husband who had recently moved to our community told me they had chosen this city over others where they had been offered positions because of the access to an “international atmosphere” they felt here. I can easily think of over a dozen immigrants, in addition to those from Latin America, who have moved to this city – from ten countries around the world. Add almost twenty international students and their countries (an additional ten), and our Latin American immigrants, and we have residents who have come from every continent on the earth. In my work at the university, I have seen international students welcomed by families and organizations, and I have often heard others acknowledge what an asset they are to the community. I also see immigrants from other parts of the world who have come to be fully integrated into the community and native residents who have traveled to and lived in dozens of countries. Rodriguez (2003) calls the United States the “meeting place of the world,” and even in this small piece of it, there is truth in that.

The international resources of our city, although often invisible, are wide-ranging. As Pipher (2002) reminds us, “Diversity in a community is as healthy as diversity in any ecosystem.” Several of the participants in this study have a vision of a cultural center that could bring all of
our residents together to share and learn from each other. It could have meeting places and cooking classes, dancing and language lessons, music, movies, and conversation – maybe even a place for a bilingual preschool program. They envision it as a place where energies and ideas and people from around the world can meet and grow.

Numerous studies (Pipher 2002, Alcoff 1998, Rodriguez 2003, Shimoni, Este & Clark 2003, Trimble 2003, Berry 2003, Hurtado 1997) have shown that the healthiest process in individuals, families and communities when cultures meet, is the development of a sense of biculturalism – a learned ability to understand both cultures and then to select which aspects of each are valid in individual situations. Puente (1996) compares the coming together of cultures to a marriage, where two people do not merge, but, instead, learn about each other and discover how to adapt to, appreciate, and get along with each other. Hurtado (1997) reminds us that the original definition of acculturation involved cultural learning and change from both directions, enabling all involved to have more conscious choices in their lives and enriching all of the populations involved. San Juan (1994) and Alaimo (2000) caution that the idea of “multiculturalism” must never be used as a way to enforce the dominant group’s culture and power on others.

What could an effective collaboration among people and cultures look like in our city? If, as Dalla et al. (2002) found, “long-term residents [of rural Midwestern communities] and immigrant newcomers appear more alike than different,” in their assessment and concerns about their communities, then there is certainly common ground for us to work together. In their study of two organizations for young women, Bertram, Hall, Fine & Weis (2000) found that in order for an organization to be truly effective in building community and in empowering diverse groups of
participants, it is necessary for the leadership to make a conscious and institutional commitment to combat racism, sexism and ageism and to work to make sure participants at all levels are aware both of that commitment and of how specific behaviors of theirs may have either a positive or a negative influence on the experiences of other participants. Jensen and Effland (2001) remind us that rural women have often worked together in groups to bring about needed reforms. According to work done by Clark and Watson (1997) women’s emphasis on relationships and their willingness to take risks to improve those relationships often lead them to develop a synergy in shared projects that can propel their work well beyond what any one of them could have done alone. In addition, they found that a willingness to work with individual differences and to embrace those differences can help to bring about creative solutions and effective associations.

Miller (2001) cautions us that family and community coherence cannot be separated – they are essential to each other, and cites a study by Geis and Ross (1998) which showed families that feel powerless withdraw from relationships with their neighbors, weakening community strength and coherence. This may be particularly true for Latino/as because of the high value they traditionally place on family and collective relationships (Gutierrez, Yeakley & Ortega 2000). Bernal and Enchaustegui-de-Jesus (1994) cite Hoffman (1978) who found that taking part in self-help or social change organizations reduced feelings of powerlessness among the Mexican-American population he studied. Safrit and Lopez (2001) assert that volunteering is an important part of the Hispanic tradition, particularly when it benefits youth or the church community, and that it increases the participants’ positive view of themselves and of their position in the community. They found people in the group they studied were much more likely to volunteer if
they were asked by a family member or a friend. Small (2002) found that when residents of a Latino housing project saw the potential for positive change and recognized their ability to build and sustain a community, they worked together and built a model neighborhood. Gjerde (1999) states that, for all immigrant populations, voluntary organizations have been crucial to their support and adaptation. Safrit and Lopez (2001) caution, though, that Hispanic immigrants may face barriers to participation in community organizations that include: family and job obligations, poverty and economic limitations, lack of English, lack of education, health issues, and racism. They suggest that volunteer activities be offered in Spanish and be structured to include family members and that volunteer recruiters and others must be culturally sensitive. Pipher (2002) recommends developing a network of “culture brokers” who can work with newcomers to help them decipher the intricacies of life in their new community, and begin to build bridges between long-term residents and immigrants. She speaks of the sense of seeking a home, a place of safety and belonging – “querencia.” She suggests that all of us have this need, and that we can nurture it in one another by reaching out and taking care of each other. Fimmen et al. (1998), lastly, remind us that no single institution in any community can bring about the changes needed to insure that all residents are welcomed and valued, but that it takes many people and organizations working together.

Conclusion

It is easy for those of us living in communities that receive immigrants to focus on our own perceptions of the issues involved and to forget, as Valdes-Rodriguez (2003) has her character Lauren remind us in the novel *The Dirty Girls’ Social Club:*

…how much courage it takes to leave your home, your language, your family and
friends – and how much fear and desperation you’d have to face to do so in the first place. It’s overwhelming … to think of the hardships many of those around us face every day in starting their new lives, how many challenges, in accomplishing the sorts of things we take for granted: talking to the cashier at the store, mailing a letter, paying a bill…

Anzaldúa, (1999) suggests that women and men of color allow whites to become their allies, and that they identify and voice their needs so that together we can develop the inner vision necessary to bring about change or progress in the outer world. As Lorena told me, “It’s not ‘they,’ it’s ‘we,’ and we need to do it – especially for the children, because that’s the future.”

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