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Ann K. Brooks

Texas State University-San Marcos, USA

Damaris Womack

Texas State University-San Marcos, USA

Lucio Varela

Texas State University-San Marcos, USA

Lewis Madhlangobe

Texas State University-San Marcos, USA

Amanda Williams

Texas State University-San Marcos, USA

See next page for additional authors

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Author Information

Ann K. Brooks, Damaris Womack, Lucio Varela, Lewis Madhlangobe, Amanda Williams, Sonia Rodriguez, and Elizabeth Garcia

Mexican Perspectives on Mexico-U.S. Immigration: Implications for Adult Education in the U.S. & Mexico

Ann K. Brooks, Damaris Womack, Lucio Varela, Lewis Madhlangobe,
Amanda Williams, Sonia Rodriguez, and Elizabeth Garcia

Texas State University-San Marcos, USA

Abstract: Mexican immigration has spawned a public discourse about the private motivations and experiences of immigrants and their families that is shaped by U.S. political and economic interests. This study sought to recover Mexican immigrants' stories about their experiences and to imagine how adult educators can address this transnational phenomenon.

Purpose and Contribution of the Study

Most studies of Mexican immigrants, particularly those which focus on education, conceptualize them as objects: objects of federal or local policy, objects of institutional and program evaluations, and objects of assimilation efforts. Similar to Massey's (2006) comments on U.S. border policy, research on immigration "has less to do with the underlying realities of Mexican immigration than with America's view of itself and its place in the world". This study began by assuming that Mexican immigrants and their families act as the subjects of their own lives. It sought to find out how, as subjects, they saw their experience as immigrants or as the families of immigrants to the U.S.

Theoretical Perspective and Literature

U.S. policies towards immigrants, including those focused on education, reflect a modernist view, which assumes immigrants make rational cost-benefit choices regarding whether or not to immigrate (Massey & Espinosa, 1997; Sassen, 1998; Burbules & Torres, 2000; Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Babb, 2005). However, at least for Mexicans, only 5% of respondents in a Pew Hispanic Center Survey (Kochhar, 2005) were unemployed prior to coming to the U.S., and their median earnings while in the U.S. were only \$300 per week. What's more, although the educational level of Mexican immigrants is increasing, human capital acquired in Mexico has little worth in the U.S., and Mexicans, regardless of education, are clustered in low-paying jobs in construction, agriculture, service, and manufacturing (Pew Hispanic Center (Kochhar, 2005, p. ii). Massey & Espinosa (1997) suggest assuming a cost-benefit motive to immigrate is too simple. Based on their research, they propose three motivating factors: human capital formation, social capital formation, and market consolidation or the impact of competitive international markets on subsistence agriculture, local industry, and the public sector.

Research Design

This paper is based on two different studies, each of which sought to recover the stories Mexican immigrants tell of their own motivations and experiences and thus to contribute to deconstructing the mainstream political and economic discourse surrounding Mexican immigration.

The first study asked, what are the challenges Mexican immigrants face in housing and educating their children in the U.S.? It took place in an urban setting in central Texas. The study's participants included the Mexican mothers of children attending a public high school. The interviewer, a native-Spanish speaker and herself an immigrant, conducted one to two hour interviews in Spanish with 5 mothers of high school students in ESL classes. The interviews focused on the challenges they faced in housing and educating their children, although the women brought up their interactions with immigration authorities and coyotes, lives in Mexico, and hopes for themselves and their families. The interviewer, who had worked as a translator prior to immigrating to the U.S., tape-recorded all interviews in the participants' homes and transcribed and translated the interviews into English. Two of the researchers then coded the data according to the research questions and additional topics that emerged in the course of the interviews. We then analyzed each topic area as unique and as it related to the others. A secondary school English teacher recruited the participants.

The second study asked, what are returned Mexican immigrants' and their family's experiences of Mexico-U.S. immigration? This study took place in and around a medium-sized city in central Mexico. The study's participants included men and women who had (a) returned to Mexico after immigrating to the U.S. or (b) remained in Mexico while children, parents, or spouses immigrated to the U.S. The interviewers, native and near-native speakers of Spanish from the U.S., Panama, and Zimbabwe, conducted both group and individual interviews with 17 participants: 12 returned immigrants and 5 family members of immigrants. The interviewers tape-recorded, translated, open-coded, and then collectively interpreted the interviews. A Mexican, Spanish language institute that is committed to Freirean-based education, solidarity, and social justice recruited the participants for the study.

For both studies, the participants' words were interpreted through the lenses of the researchers, all doctoral students and one professor of varying nationalities and ethnicities.

Immigrant Women in the U.S. Tell Their Stories

The immigrant women's stories tell of their struggle and hardship in the U.S. Several of the women described the dangers and expense of *coyotes* bringing them and their children across. Juana said that her children were kept in captivity by *coyotes* until she paid more money: "...we had problems with the *coyote* that brought our children to the United States. He had charged U.S. \$1500 per person to bring four of our family members, including my two daughters, my brother, and my brother-in-law...The coyote made my brother and my brother-in-law work for their food until we paid more money."

Exploitation such as this grew out of the constant threat of apprehension by the INS. Juana and her family had to move to avoid threats from the coyote. "I told my husband it would be better if we moved because he [*the coyote*] threatened us with calling immigration. This could get big, and we could lose everything and get deported. So we broke the lease and moved."

Like Juana, the other women also experienced a lack of control over housing, including price and maintenance. According to Lilia, "We have had problems with mold in the bathroom ...its been like that for almost two years. I don't want to bother them [the landlords] because we are not paying that much compared to other places, so I do not want to complain. My daughter's room always smells bad. We suspect there is toilet

drainage, and she is constantly pouring deodorizers.” Leticia, another immigrant explained, “Yes, the houses in [this city] are expensive. We moved because of space and also because the other house had a leak from the air conditioning, which damaged the wall to where it started to peel. Before that we had a problem with the plumbing, but my husband fixed it.” Most of the immigrant mothers described living with their children in houses with multiple families and having to move frequently, forcing their children to change schools.

Poverty and frequent moves meant that several of the women were troubled for themselves and their children by having to live in dangerous areas of the city. For example, Juana told her interviewer,

We have gone from bad to worse. All kinds of bad things have happened to us in this complex. One of our cars got the window broken and the stereo stolen. They robbed our cars two times. In addition, I have been to the office several times to complain about the neighbors who live above me. It seems that they live by night and sleep by day. On one occasion ... I would leave at 5:00 to get to work by 5:30 am. I was coming out of my car when a man came up to me and told me to open the door, in English.

Cierra said that at her last home, “My son’s bicycle was stolen from outside our door. My neighbors were drug dealers. The drunkards were another problem.”

Several of the women were concerned that a lack of English put a limit on employment for themselves and their children. Lilia explained, “In my personal case, the most difficult thing about living in this country with children is not being able to learn English as fast as a young person. So, it is difficult for me to get a job and help my husband with the expenses.”

Immigration policy regarding access to schooling for children varies from state to state and frequently changes. According to Cierra, who hopes her children can do better than she has, “My children are not here legally and can’t go to school. We do not qualify for free lunch. I don’t want my children to fail to go to college as I did. I want them to have a degree, and with a degree, anyone can give them some type of job here.” Her husband also added, “My daughter wants to be a lawyer. Maybe the money will not be enough, but we will do all we can. I will work day and night to get her what she needs to become a lawyer. My only fear is that immigration may stop us from doing this. I really want them [their children] to do something with their lives.”

Some of the immigrant mothers found poverty was something to be ashamed of in the US. Lorena explained, “When it gets cold in this country, it reaches your bones. One really needs a coat. Last year we went buy coats for kids, but my daughter did not want to go. She was too ashamed. When we bought her one, she did not appreciate it, she did not like it. I told her she should have come to pick what she wanted.”

A couple of the immigrant women were ambivalent about coming to the U.S. Juana said, “I tell [my children] they need to learn English. We are in a foreign country out of necessity, not because we really want to be here.” Maricruz began to cry as she explained, “Right now, the only other thing I want is to go see my parents who are ill. My mother is really sick. I have not seen them since I came, and I can’t go back until we are legalized or deported.” Finally, Lilia said about her daughter, “Our dreams are for her to become a professional, but now she is not going to school, and we are just like before. In this case, we should have stayed in Mexico.”

To conclude, the Mexico-U.S. immigrant women's stories reflect their concerns with the INS, their own families, and economic challenges. These are complex, multifaceted, and individual and do not reflect the simple goal of optimizing their earnings. The predominant goal was increasing their children's human capital.

Immigrants Who Returned to Mexico Tell Their Stories

The researchers interviewed several returned immigrants and immigrant family members in the Mexican state of Morelos about their experiences in the U.S. Similar to the immigrant women in the U.S., using a *coyote* was costly and dangerous.

Reasons for immigrating varied most often related to family members. Four of the women we interviewed went to the U.S. to visit their families. Irma told us, "I just wanted to visit my children. I went back when I heard my son made it over... I tried again, and this time I got a visa. I went three times. The first time I got a fifteen-day permit, and I came back. The second time I had a month permit and stayed two months." Adriana, a medical doctor, said that her mother "...moved to the U.S. to be with her husband, but she wants to retire here [in Mexico]." On the other hand, some of the men were more likely to immigrate to accumulate money for a house or business in Mexico or to send money to family. More than one of the married men moved in with another woman in the U.S. One said that his Mexican wife and children were "dead" to him while he was in the U.S. One young wife left behind in a rural village with small children depended on neighbors for survival as she seldom heard from received money from her husband. Mexican families are some of the "collateral damage" of U.S. immigration policy. One youth went to earn money to return to school:

I attempted to cover the expenses during one semester at the travel agency school. This included transportation costs between Tepotzlan and Cuernavaca as well as the required didactic materials, these were very expensive, and other resources I needed for school. I couldn't keep up with the expenses so I dropped out of school intending to work and save money in order to go back and finish. Unfortunately we work a great deal for very little money. One day my mother mentioned that I could go to the USA and earn enough money while living with my aunt who lived in Calif. Then you would have the money you need to finish your schooling...With that dream I decided to go to the United States.

Once in the U.S., some of the immigrants described being surprised at how hard life was. This contrasted with stories prevalent in Mexico about how good life was in the U.S. According to Porfirio, another returned immigrant,

Over there the money has no value. It has value here. The money from over there has value only here... But it is very difficult to save money working honestly over there. To go and work over there is not what the American dream is about. There is no future in the United States for someone who lives there illegally. You work hard and earn little. Don't think you are going over there to earn a lot of money. You are going to be faced with another language. You are no one. You don't even exist. You can't buy a house.

Jesus-Ernesto (47 years) explained, "For about three months, I waited for a job, but I was discouraged. At one time, I decided that if someone could lend me money, I'd go back to Mexico. At least there I could do crafts and work." Later when he found a job, "[The employers] realized that I did not have papers. They told I could not work there anymore...Again I was without a job for two or three months. I joined another company

and worked for another 2 years and the same thing happened again with the papers. My salary was \$6.50 an hour.”

Crossing-over often means immigrants leave behind many responsibilities. Older immigrants saw themselves as more goal-directed and less likely to spend their money drinking than younger ones. Roman, fifty-seven, explains,

When I went to the U.S., I had a specific plan. I went with the intention of saving money and coming back. The immediate priority was to make that money and send it to my family, so that we could resolve some of our monetary problems, as I could not make much money here [Mexico]. ...Fortunately, I could regularly send US\$150 – \$200 every week. Another plan was not to drink beer or waste money. Nothing. That was the idea. The plan was also to be done in one year, no more than a year. At the end of the eleventh month, when I left the last company, I told myself that it was time to return to Mexico. I analyzed it and said to myself, “If I look for another job and get it, and if it is a good job, I will not leave, but will stay another six months...I was never treated badly-never. I paid off most of the debts that I had. That is one of the reasons I left.”

Roman concluded by giving advice to future illegal immigrants, “Immigrants should have a goal and be disciplined. Some younger male immigrants get together after work and drink, but I never did. That is why I never got into trouble.”

Ana Leticia also crossed over with a specific plan linked to economic and legal problems. She had been divorced and at the same time fired from work when her three children were nine, seven, and five years old. She was afraid she would soon be taken to court for outstanding bills, so she crossed over illegally. As soon as she got a job in the U.S., she began to send money home and to help her parents clear her debts. She also paid for her children’s education. She noted, “To my children it appeared as if I had abandoned them. This affected me a lot, especially whenever I talked to them on the phone. So I managed to save money and buy some sewing machines, which you see here. They have created employment for most of my family members here in Mexico.”

Conclusions and Implications for Adult Education

These Mexico-U.S. immigrants’ stories reflect their concerns with their own families, economic challenges, and social relations. These are complex, overlapping, and individual and do not reflect a simple cost-benefit decision. Rather, they support Massey & Espinosa’s (1997) findings that Mexican immigration to the U.S. is grounded in the more fundamental motivations of human capital formation, social capital formation, and international market consolidation.

Currently, federally funded adult education efforts in the U.S. center on English language and civics education. Highlander has recently been focusing on immigrant rights. Additional efforts at providing basic needs and acculturation are made by churches and non-profit organizations. In Mexico, labor organizers are currently trying to educate their workers and citizens about the global and national factors that have contributed to restructuring their personal economies (personal interview with Alfredo Dominguez, Mexican labor organizer). The Mexican government educates immigrants about border-crossing safety and work and education in the U.S. through efforts both in Mexico and in the U.S. (personal interview with the Director General for Immigrants in the State of Morelos). El Instituto De Los Mexicanos En El Exterior (2007) operates programs for Mexican adults in the U.S. who cannot read or write. They provide language instruction

through the Mexican Consulate in the U.S., through the internet, and via educational television.

Although Mexicans and Mexican-Americans residing on the U.S.-Mexico border have historically been part of transnational families, a change in the character of Mexican immigration to the U.S. (immigrants more likely to stay due to restrictive immigration policies) and increasingly integrated Mexican and U.S. economies have intensified the transnational character of citizens, companies, universities, and schools of both countries. Nevertheless, except for a literacy project between Mexican and U.S. border states reported on in 1993 (Educacion sin Fronteras/Education without Borders), adult educators have yet not begun to collaborate across borders for the benefit of Mexican immigrants.

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