

The Social Capital of Immigrants and Non-immigrants in Segregated Communities in Los Angeles and Houston

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INTRODUCTION:

So far, studies on segregation have focused only on the disadvantages of poor people (i.e., Massey and Denton 1993). There has never been done an in-depth exploration and comparison between immigrants and non-immigrant groups who reside in segregated communities in the U.S. regarding the role that social capital (the advantage of having contacts (Burt 2001) could play among the members of those communities with regards of survival strategies. In this study I use the data from the Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality (MCSUI) for African Americans and Mexicans in Los Angeles and the preliminary data of a pilot research project comparing a Mexican immigrant neighborhood and an African American neighborhood in the city of Houston in order to identify any similarities or differences that may exist in the ways that segregated Mexican immigrants and African Americans may provide social capital to others within their own community.

BACKGROUND OF PROBLEM

The literature on racial segregation has pointed out that African Americans who live in segregated communities are in disadvantage because a perpetuation of poverty takes place in such communities. African Americans live in segregated communities due to social and structural mechanisms, which is in most instances involuntary. In such conditions, to experience economic upward mobility for most African Americans is almost impossible (Massey and Denton, 1993).

On the other hand, research on ethnic enclaves has in most cases only focused on the entrepreneurial role of immigrants, (i.e., Light and Bhachu, 1993). Such studies have only looked at successful immigrant groups such as is the case of certain groups of Asian immigrants in the U.S. and in most cases such studies have ignored the rest of the most current immigrant group, the Latino immigrants. Only, Cuban immigrants have been successfully integrated in such literature, (see Portes and Rumbaut, 1996). One of the Latino's most underprivileged immigrant groups in the U.S. is that composed by

Mexican immigrants. According to Jeffrey Passel (2005), 6 million out of the 11 million undocumented immigrants in the U.S. are Mexican. Such high rate of undocumented migration among Mexicans places them as one of the more extremely disadvantaged immigrant groups in the U.S..

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Granovetter's (1982) important work on networks notes that strong ties may be more effective under conditions of high risk and uncertainty, traits that certainly characterize the status of undocumented migrants in the United States and may also apply to the status of African Americans. Although he had the poor in mind when noting this effect, undocumented status also creates high barriers to efficient participation in the labor market, yielding high rates of abuse and exploitation. Under such conditions, migrants experience a similar social dynamic whereby cohesive, homogenous, clique-like networks become more effective for survival and success (Flores 2005a). As did Mouw (2004;1) in his study of undocumented migrants, I found in my previous research that social capital, as measured by the number of friends and relatives in the U.S., had a positive effect on wages by providing access to better jobs through reference and recruitment (Flores 2005b).

However, studies of segregation and poverty have not considered the potential advantages of strong ties in the survival strategies of poor people living in poor urban neighborhoods and have instead focused exclusively on the disadvantages (i.e., Massey and Denton 1993) although some have noted the importance of strong ties in the upward mobility of immigrant entrepreneurs (i.e., Light and Bhachu, 1993). In my prior research work I found that in the case of segregated immigrant enclaves such as those of Mexicans, the social dynamics are different from those prevailing in non-immigrant minority neighborhoods. Solidarity relations are prevalent among Mexican rural dwellers, and those immigrating from urban communities, when their urban-base ties fell, they end out being attracted by the rural dweller networks thorough a process that I call, the "clique effect" (Flores 2005a). Therefore, Mexican immigrants may segregate themselves purposely, whereas other groups may be forced into segregation through prejudice and discrimination. In current literature, there is no knowledge with regards of to what extent African Americans may support each other. By using the African American neighborhood as a

tool for comparison, one can learn more about the ways in which immigrant and non-immigrant groups cope with poverty and survival. It is this line of inquiry that I intend to follow in my future research, looking more closely at possible differences in the effects of segregation among immigrants and non-immigrants.

METHOD

First, I analyze the Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality dataset (Los Angeles sample) for African Americans and Mexican immigrants in order to identify who provides the help and the types of social support provided among the members for each group. I explore all the social network variables including the characteristics of the contacts who provided the help. Then I compare such findings with the evidence provided by survey and ethnographic data collected in one African American and one Mexican Immigrant neighborhood in the city of Houston, Texas. I will then compare the findings for each group not only across groups, but also across each of the metropolitan areas. I expect this study to reveal important similarities and differences among immigrants and non-immigrants with respect to their social support strategies for survival.

A better understanding of the social capital exchange that takes place in segregated communities of immigrants and non-immigrants can provide insights to policy makers so they can design specific social policy and social programs in order to support each different neighborhood according to its specific needs. So far I have found in my prior research work that the extensive social capital exchange among Mexican immigrants is driven by high levels of solidarity behavior and the enforcement of social norms (Flores 2005a). Policy makers can then take advantage of such social behavior in order to distribute new and important information among the member of the community. If the African Americans do or do not behave in the same manner as immigrant groups do, then policy makers could then utilize the similar or different strategies to provide social support to them.

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