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Decades of longing and effort towards a sense of community: A multiple case study on immigrants in the United States

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ABSTRACT

Objectives This exploratory study aims at investigating the effort, struggle, and inner drive of immigrants towards US citizenship and higher socio-economic status (SES).

Methods This is a multiple case study with a qualitative approach. With non-probability convenience sampling, we selected five cases from the Los Angeles area for in-depth interviews. A thematic method along with the four-element framework on sense of community by McMillan and Chavis (1986) were employed for data analysis.

Results Although each participant's journey towards citizenship and higher SES is unique, the cross-case data synthesis presented a clear uniformity of deep desire and willing sacrifices for a sense of community among the participants.

Conclusion While citizenship and SES can be seen as enticing rewards or even "purse strings" for which immigrants are willing to work hard, what immigrants truly long for is a sense of community. It is this longing that drives immigrants to overcome adversities and rise up to build strong communities anywhere they settle.

Keywords partnership, multiple case study, sense of community, immigrants, U.S. citizenship, socio-economic status

INTRODUCTION

"Immigrant" or "foreign-born" are sometimes used synonymously to define individuals living in the United States who were not U.S. citizens at birth (Camarota, 2007). Immigration as a controversial topic has been argued at length with vast amounts of data and evidence presented by both "for" and "against" scholars. Among the published work, much of the research was contributed to the economic and political effects in relation to immigrants' attainment of citizenship or socio-economic mobility. However, immigration

Highlights

► This is a youth-led research study. Youth researchers took all initiatives and made all decisions throughout the entire research process.

► The multiple case study design enables cross-case synthesis and analytical generalization while grounding the investigation of the research topic in real-life context.

► This study promotes the notion that while immigration has become a divisive issue, immigrants are here to unite and to develop communities.

at its core is a social-emotional issue (Deaux, 2006; Kaivo-oja, 2014; Turner, 2016). To recognize it as so, in this study we will deemphasize the uses of political and economic means and measurements. Instead, we will explore this topic from a community perspective. Through the multiple case study, we aim to answer the following research questions:

To what extent are citizenship and SES significant to immigrants? Are they the real drive of the ever-increasing immigrant population?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Immigrants and communities nationwide

Researchers have long been studying rural, urban, and suburban communities separately as there are intrinsic differences in nearly all aspects. The distinctive characteristics of these three types of

communities meant that there are distinctions in their views of immigrants and their ways to develop a sense of community (Walker & Leitner, 2011; Garcia & Davidson, 2013).

Ramos (2016) pointed out that the growth or decline of rural communities in the United States depends on the immigrant population. While the rise and fall of population numbers as clear measures make immigrants' contributions to rural communities indisputable, in urban and suburban communities, immigrants' contributions are much harder to identify (Klein, et al. 2017). Therefore, to investigate immigrants' perception on citizenship and higher SES researchers need to first understand the underlying psychological drive for community among immigrants.

Sense of community

Today most individuals belong to some community or other whether it be defined through characteristics of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, culture, or interest among others. However, the psychological construct of "sense of community" was not established until 1974 by Sarason and then later refined by McMillan and Chavis (1986). They defined a sense of community as consisting of four elements: membership, influence, reinforcement, and Social Emotional Connection. Ramos (2017) explains these elements by stating that membership is the feeling of belonging to a group; influence is a sense of mattering to a group and individual mutually; reinforcement refers to integration and fulfillment of needs; shared emotional connection is the belief that members share similar past, places, or experiences.

Ramos (2017) stated that a better developed sense of community and along it all its elements leads to a greater satisfaction level: a sense of community is crucial for groups to feel healthy and resilient, as well as for fostering social, political, and cultural change. However, because immigrants leave their previous community, they must establish a new one because a sense of community is "something greater than oneself and is a basic human need."

Demystification

Community and sense of community are concepts that have been publicized and often misused (Kenny, 2003; Hancock et al., 2012). Here we discuss some compelling misconceptions about these concepts.

Across the United States, citizenship and SES are common identifiers of large and small "communities."

Such identifiers, for those who have them and those without, are symbols of entitlement, not symbols of community (Williams, 1996). On a neighborhood level, the focal point of a community is often the design of quality spaces and services underscoring aspirational materialism rather than a sense of community (Hooghiemstra, 2022). Among organizations and businesses, collaboration processes are largely driven by business optimization and profit-making, not a sense of community (Szlezák, 2014).

In regard to the process of developing a sense of community, popular approaches at both societal level and individual level are generally ineffective if not outright disastrous. For example, the hate-and-fear media approach that appears to be effective in political campaigns, can only create a sense of siege among its receivers, not a sense of community (Richtarik, 2006; Rigterink & Schomerus, 2017; Pon, 2018). Similarly, the guilt-and-shame approach that is used as an emotional lever may create temporary behavioral changes but cannot generate a sense of community (Lifton, 1989; Jacquet, 2017). On an individual level, it would not be effective if one tries to create a sense of community out of moral obligation (Brown & Lambert, 2015; Follesdal, 2019). For individuals who work towards a sense of community through inward or outward social conformity, however, their efforts may result in resentment or burnout, not a sense of community (Al-Azzawi & Inalhan, 2018; Ķešāne & Weyher, 2021; Harell & Hinckley, 2022).

METHODS

Research design

In this study, we employed an exploratory multiple case study with a qualitative approach. This design allows in-depth examination of individuals' experience and thought process while enabling cross-case synthesis and analytical generalization (Eisenhardt, 1989; Baxter & Jack, 2008; Demassis & Kotlar, 2014; & Ponelis, 2015). With this research design we were able to generate an understanding of various stages and paths of immigration while evaluating the personal experiences and subjective beliefs of immigrants in regard to how they view their current sense of community and lack thereof.

Participants

Through non-probability convenience sampling, individuals around the greater Los Angeles area were

contacted via email; the emails of which were taken from referrals of family friends and from professionals at local institutions. The email message contained the description of the study and a brief overview of what being a participant would entail. Once the participants had agreed to the one-hour interview, consent forms were sent out by the researchers and signed by the participant.

To ensure that this process remained unbiased, we followed set criteria for each participant and only reached out to those who fit these standards. The participants were picked with the intention of obtaining a variety of legal statuses, citizenship pathways, and ethnicities/nationalities. Ultimately all of the participants were women ranging from ages 20 and above, and all with a minimum of some high school education. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the participants.

Data collection and analysis

The participants were sent a link to attend a Zoom video conference for the interview with the exception of one interview being conducted in person and recorded with audio only. A participant consent form with detailed data privacy information was signed by the participants prior to joining the interview. Each interview was recorded and lasted around 30 minutes to 1 hour. We began the interviews by explaining the purpose of the study to the participants. The participants were informed that they may opt to skip any questions they did not feel comfortable answering. The first set of questions were to gain background information on the participants; this included their age, educational background, country of origin, and immigration pathway.

While the interview was ongoing, we took note of the answers of the participants using google documents. Notable moments during the interview were timestamped for future use. These timestamps were revisited by the researcher in order to obtain direct quotes and analyze the data further. When a participant would make a point similar to another participant, we would timestamp this as well. Common themes and patterns were discovered across the researcher's notes and timestamps.

Once all the interviews were over and the notes were complete, the interviews were transcribed verbatim and compiled to create a list of provisional codes. The main focus of this process was to categorize participants' personal experiences with various elements of a sense of community as well as longing and effort exerted with respect to a certain element. Credibility and confirmability of the codes were established through multiple rounds of analysis. After coding all transcripts, the researcher created a table displaying grouped and organized codes. This visual presentation was then used for identifying patterns and themes. Additional themes were discovered and processed whenever necessary.

RESULTS

Case 1: Isabelle

Isabelle is a 32-year-old woman who immigrated to America from Mexico when she was about 9 years old through a visa overstay. She along with the rest of her family of five applied for residency followed by citizenship. The entire process lasted approximately 20 years from the moment they applied for residency to the moment they became citizens.

Isabelle and her family encountered many struggles. One such problem was the initial rejection of their application for citizenship. This prolonged their wait time and doubled all of their application costs and fees.

Isabelle was not a member of the DACA program, and thus when it came time for her to attend college, she was forced to take 2 gap years. At that point in time, she had not received her green card and could not work to pay off her tuition or receive federal aid.
Eventually, Isabelle was able to attend graduate school and become a licensed therapist. Now she places much emphasis on giving back to her community and helping people who endured some of the same struggles she did growing up.
Notable Quotes:
"As a therapist, I've often thought that people who immigrate or go through the citizenship process should attend therapy and heal. Sometimes life moves so fast that we don't get a chance to process all of the things we have endured."

Case 2: Yasmine

Yasmine is a 56-year-old woman who immigrated to America from Argentina in 2003. She had long before dreamt of immigrating, but ultimately gave up due to lack of resources and guidance. However, she eventually fell in love with a U.S Citizen then applied for residency and citizenship through her husband's sponsorship.

Although she had a few assets and was well educated, the overall process was very difficult for her and her husband to manage. Together they decided to hire a lawyer; in the process Yasmine lost all of her money and property in Argentina to be able to both afford the lawyer's services and pay application fees. Yasmine tried to be a model American while she waited for documentation to get approved. She knew that she could not work legally without a green card, but still needed to make money. She went so far as to take jobs that would withhold her pay until she could legally accept it resulting in immense debt.

Yasmine currently lives a happy life with her husband and kids. She has gotten back on her feet by working as a teacher to educate youth on difficult topics such as immigration. She hopes to mitigate the negative stereotypes placed on immigrant children and to improve their mental health.

Notable Quotes:

"I would like people to be more aware of others and have more empathy. As a society we strive for acceptance not tolerance."

Case 3: Rosemary

Rosemary is a 20-year-old Dreamer, a member of the DACA program. She became a Dreamer her sophomore year of high school, but she is not documented. Rosemary came to America from Mexico when she was 9 months old; in crossing the border she was separated and then reunited with the rest of her family once in America.

In total, the process of becoming a Dreamer took Rosemary about a year. The application process is very strict and is designed to weed people out. Being a Dreamer simply allows you to work and attend school in America legally. Dreamers cannot travel in and out of the country or receive federal funding.

Rosemary notes the mental burden that being undocumented has had on her and her family. She was constantly feeling like she didn't belong and that at any moment she could be deported. This stress and anxiety was especially elevated during the 2016 election. While Rosemary would like to become a citizen, she feels that having a sense of community is more important to her, as the citizenship pathways present too many cons and few pros.

Notable Quotes:

"We would hear some happy stories but not as many. It's become more acceptable to admit that you're an immigrant but before we used to be scared and ashamed."

Case 4: Mwanga

Mwanga immigrated to America in her 30s to pursue her graduate studies and to first and foremost learn English. After completing her graduate program, Mwanga was able to find a job. A year later, she obtained a work visa through the H1B lottery, which did not allow her to change jobs for several years. When she eventually found a more suitable job, her work visa was audited by the USCIS, and the process resulted in much emotional stress and mental health issues that to date Mwanga is still trying to manage.

While in America she had initially tried to distance herself from people who were exactly like her, and instead she tried to "be open minded, so that she can learn the language and culture." Because of this blind "open-mindedness," she wasn't even aware of all the racist comments and discriminations; she just wanted to fit in. Eventually, she recognized that there was a stigma around immigrants: The native-born people see immigrants as individuals who come to America to take away their jobs and to threaten their livelihoods.

When Mwanga finally obtained a green card, she left her well paying job to work with underprivileged children because that's where she could find a sense of community. Looking back on her immigration pathway, she realized that she had directed all her previous decisions and effort towards building a sense of community rather than pursuing a higher SES.

Notable Quotes:

"It is ok to feel like you both belong and don't belong; you don't have to be either. It is also ok to not know what you feel. I spent a lot of time trying to fit in and a lot of pretending."

Case 5: Fernanda

Fernanda is a 50-year-old woman who immigrated to America from Mexico in 2001 at the age of 28. She had previously made multiple attempts at crossing the Mexicali border, ultimately arriving in California. She has now been living in the United States for over 20 years. Fernanda has a daughter and must wait until she is 21 years old to be able to apply for residency and citizenship. This is due to her entering the country "illegally."

In her 20 years of living in America, she has faced many hardships and has had to adapt to a new country. Fernanda does not have any form of documentation, and yet she needs to work. Fernanda had to work under

a false SSN in order to provide for her family. One of the major issues she noted was the discrimination faced from employers. Often undocumented immigrants are forced to accept low paying jobs for fear of deportation.

Fernanda was grateful for the little bit of government assistance that she receives (food stamps, covid relief, etc.) but ultimately just wanted to provide for her family and be able to travel out of the country to see her family in Mexico.

Notable Quotes:

"We take the jobs that nobody wants. You will never see a white person in the fields or behind sewing machines; they take advantage of our efforts."

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to investigate the effort, struggle, and inner drive of immigrants towards US citizenship and higher socio-economic status. After assessing the data, it was clear that the main drive for citizenship and higher SES was the need for a sense of community. Our interviewees would willingly sacrifice their citizenship, economic stability, or other socioeconomic factors for the sake of community. In the literature review section, we introduced the four-factor framework of sense-of-community by McMillan and Chavis (1986). Below we employ this framework to discuss immigrants' strong desire and willing sacrifice for a sense of community.

Membership

For native-born Americans, citizenship itself is a membership. For immigrants, however, it is anything but that. Throughout the data synthesis it was consistently found that citizenship was merely a formality. Although membership was initially harder to identify, it became clearer when we looked at it through the challenges of the immigration process instead of citizenship itself. This relationship was best described by Mwanga, "I think that community is less about being drawn to people who are alike but more about a shared sense of being driven away... from the privileged."

Although the U.S. immigration system has historically treated individuals very poorly (Bookey, 2014; Coulter, et al., 2020) , many immigrants choose to remain in the communities they have just begun to establish. It is also clear that many interviewees were willing to put their economic stability at stake for a potential membership in a community. Rosemary, for

example, lost an excessive amount of money and remained undocumented just to continue her education in America, so that she could maintain her membership among others of her situation.

Influence

All interviewees expressed that they hardly have any influence over the greater American community. The most notable reason for this being taxation without representation. The interviewees, documented and undocumented, all file their taxes, and yet until they obtain full citizenship, they do not have voting rights or a say in the direction of the country.

The chance for immigrants to gain influence at work or in the community is often just as bleak. Mwanga is a prime example of the effort immigrants exert in order to obtain influence, "after hitting so many walls as an immigrant, I knew that I would never have the influence that I desire by working for someone else." She also explained, "people thought I was crazy for giving up a job that many people dream of, but I would do it all again without hesitation because I love doing things that matter to my community… and who doesn't?"

Reinforcement

Reinforcement or "fulfillment of needs" was observed among interviewees in terms of outreach organizations and initiatives. Four of the five interviewees mentioned CHIRLA, the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIR, 2022), which offers support, guidance and fee waivers for the various steps of the citizenship process. Isabelle notes the importance of CHIRLA and other programs like it. She received a waiver from CHIRLA that helped her pay fees for citizenship; whenever she has a chance, she tells people to go there. On the other hand, Patricia expressed her desire for such fulfillment of needs by saying that she wished that she had known more about the resources available because programs like CHIRLA bring warmth to people at their time of need.

CHIRLA is primarily sustained by immigrant workers. It started at the local level but has now grown to a national organization; almost all branches are staffed by immigrants. Isabelle clearly demonstrates an effort to reinforce the immigrant community. As a therapist, she specializes in helping immigrant families, and she believes that immigrants need more assistance.

Her specialization does not make her the most money but being able to reinforce her community and fulfill the needs of others makes her sacrifice worthwhile.

Shared emotional connection

Shared emotional connection is perhaps the most present element, as it pertains to experiences. Immigration in itself is an experience. The interviewees all noted that they had to leave their country of origin essentially for better opportunities, whether those be related to their financial situation, safety concerns, or just a broader horizon. However, social-emotional connection does not only pertain to events prior to immigrating; it also applies to ongoing experiences.

Fear presented itself as one of the most binding emotions of immigrant experiences. Isabelle relates a memory of her parents, "when families went close to the San Diego area for our Waterpolo games, the undocumented parents would cry and hide in the back of the bus in fear that they would be detained and deported." The confrontation of fears shows plenty of the way in which immigrant parents support not only their children but those around them. They were ultimately risking their chances of citizenship and facing thousands in potential deportation fees just to maintain a sense of community. This fear of being deported showcases how widespread it is but also how much immigrants strive to establish that sense of community in America.

Apart from fear there was also an overwhelming sense of pride in the immigrant community itself. Yasmine expresses how she was so happy when DACA finally passed. While never affiliated with DACA herself, Patricia felt happy for the people like her who were finally getting opportunities to get ahead. Fernanda also adds to our understanding by expressing her confidence in the immigrant community, "we take the jobs that nobody wants… we know that we are being taken advantage of, but we keep working hard and keep building communities, because that's who we are."

CONCLUSION

The four elements of sense of community – membership, influence, reinforcement, and shared emotional connection – have proved to be helpful tools. Through the data synthesis it was revealed that being a citizen or having higher SES had little correlation to the sense of community immigrants experienced. While it is difficult for immigrants to find a sense of

community in the country as a whole, they seemed to connect well and experience the four elements of community among other immigrants. A particularly interesting characteristic of the four elements is that membership and influence were characterized as unification through negative experiences. In other words, all the negative things they experience, discrimination, or lack of assistance served to strengthen the bond among immigrants. In comparison, reinforcement and shared emotional connection were a direct response by putting the power in the hands of the people; it was evident that many immigrants had each other's best interest in mind.

In conclusion, although citizenship and higher SES are still significant symbols to many, the ultimate drive of the immigration population is a sense of community. And in today's "divided America" (Campbell, 2018), it is this community-yearning population that continues to build, to unite, and to generate hope for the entire nation.

The limitations of this exploratory study include single-gender cases and limited geographic coverage. The 1986 framework of sense-of-community that we adopted meant that we were unable to perform in-depth analyses on more nuanced psychological elements. Therefore, we recommend future researchers to conduct studies with larger samples and to develop updated frameworks of sense-of-community that meet the social-emotional needs of society at large.

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