

Immigrant assimilation in new destinations: Co- and inter-ethnic social and work networks in rural Oregon

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Introduction

The United States is rightly considered a nation of immigrants. Perhaps the most defining immigration flow of our time, however, comes from Mexico, which is the largest and most enduring in U.S. history (Durand, Massey, Capoferro, 2005; Zúñiga and Hernández-León, 2005). It is a migration fraught with contention both politically and socially. The U.S. government has, at times, supported and encouraged immigration from Mexico to bolster a dwindling workforce in the agricultural sector, as during the Bracero Era which ran from World War II to the mid-1960s, while at others militarizing the border and restricting social services for immigrants as during the 1990s and 2000s (Massey, Durand, and Malone, 2002; Nevins, 2002; Durand, Massey, and Capoferro, 2005). Perhaps no other legislation exemplifies this conflict better than the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), passed in 1986, which simultaneously provided amnesty for 2.3 million Mexicans living in the U.S., while also criminalizing employment of undocumented immigrants and ushering in an era of strong political and social anti-immigrant sentiment. The majority of immigrants from Mexico have, and still do, settle in urban centers in California, Texas, Florida, Illinois and New York. However, IRCA also provided an unprecedented freedom of movement for millions of newly authorized Mexican immigrants who began to leave “traditional” gateway cities or bypass them altogether, and settle in rural and small-town America (Crowley, Lichter, and Qian, 2006; Gozdziaik and Martin, 2005). Although research has been conducted in these “new destinations” since the early 2000s, there is much that remains unknown regarding how immigrants assimilate into their new communities, and how networks do or do not develop between immigrants themselves and between immigrants and the broader community. Informal work is one avenue through which to view assimilation and social networks in new destinations. This type of work is recognized as being an important livelihood strategy for immigrants living in traditional destinations, as well as commonplace economic activity in the U.S. generally and in small and rural communities specifically. Additionally, while research on both immigrant and nonmetropolitan communities emphasize the importance of strong social networks in the establishment of informal work ties, these literatures do not overlap significantly. Steeped in the literatures on new destination migration, informal work, social networks and ethnic relations, this research addresses the following questions:

How does engagement in informal work differ between non-Hispanic whites and Hispanics in new rural destinations?

- a. What role does informal work play in economic wellbeing, and how does this vary for non-Hispanic whites and Hispanics?
- b. What are the informal work and social network ties between and among non-Hispanic whites and Hispanics in new destination communities?
- c. To what extent does embeddedness in co-ethnic social networks constrain or create economic opportunity?

Data and methods

Extracted from a larger mixed-methods research project, this paper examines findings from a case study analysis based in a nonmetropolitan new destination in Oregon. Although the

prevalence of Hispanics in Oregon remains somewhat lower than the national average – 12.5 percent versus 17.4 percent in 2014, respectively – the Hispanic growth rate in Oregon has been increasing rapidly since the 1980s, when the Hispanic population in the state was only 2.5 percent. Between 1990 and 2013, the Hispanic population in the state grew by over 500 percent and accounted for nearly half of the state’s entire population growth from 2000-2010 (OOEA, 2011; Garcia, 2015). With nearly 500,000 Latinos in Oregon, they comprise the state’s largest minority population and make Oregon the 14th largest Latino concentration in the country (Garcia, 2015). Eighty-five percent of Hispanics in Oregon are of Mexican origin, and over a third are foreign born (OOEA, 2011; Garcia, 2015).

Bannock¹ was selected as the case site for this research based on its new destination timing, its similarity to the state on a variety of measures, and the Spanish language/immigrant resources available in the community. Between 1990-2014, the Hispanic population of Bannock increased by over 450 percent. The vast majority of that increase occurred between 1990-2000. The 2010 Census showed a Hispanic population of over 15 percent, which was a bit higher than the current rate of 11.3 percent. The reasons for this decrease are equally a declining Hispanic population and strong non-Hispanic population growth. Nearly 10 percent of the entire population is foreign born, and the vast majority of this population is from Latin America. Of this Hispanic population in Bannock, well over 50 percent are foreign born and of Mexican descent. Bannock is a non-metropolitan community with a total population of approximately 10,000. It relies heavily on agriculture, natural resource extraction, and tourism, as it has throughout its history, although science and technology is a growing field of employment in the community as well. The educational attainment measures in Bannock are similar to the state rate, both of which reflect higher attainment than the national average. Although the unemployment rate in Bannock is somewhat lower than the state’s rate, it has a lower median household income and higher poverty rate than the state average.

The case study was conducted in the winter and spring of 2016, and consisted of 39 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with immigrants and non-immigrants in the community, and a document analysis of state and local policies, official meeting minutes, and newspaper articles. The analysis highlights three important preliminary findings regarding the relationship between social networks, informal work, and assimilation in Bannock: identity, seasonality, perception of workers.

Results

As expected, informal work is both common and accepted in Bannock as a livelihood strategy and an aspect of identity; this is true for both immigrants and the broader community. In fact, people seemed to be more comfortable and willing to discuss their informal work activities in terms of personal and community identity than as a livelihood strategy, although it clearly was both. “When we’re in need they help us, and [when they’re in need] we help them” and “this is just what we do here” were common ways to discuss informal work in the community. Even when people were being paid directly or bartering, most did not want to talk about informal work as *work*, but rather as a way to support or relate to the people around them. This communal sense of identity and community building was expressed by both immigrants and non-immigrants alike. While it could have acted as a point of commonality to strengthen social networks, beliefs about why each other participates in informal work may

¹ The name and details of the community have been altered in order to protect the identities of research participants.

actually create a wall between the two groups, stymying network development, and slowing assimilation. When comparing ethnic group motivations for informal work participation, a distinctive us-versus-them dynamic developed. “We” do informal work because it is part of who we are, how we related to the community, and in order to support our neighbors and friends during times of need; “they” do informal work out of economic necessity. Both non-Hispanic whites and Latinos in Bannock expressed a belief in this dichotomy, and rarely acknowledged that both motivations were likely true for both groups.

This understanding of informal work as part of identity was likely strengthened by the difficult economic situation faced by the majority of the population in Bannock, where the economy is dominated by seasonal employment in the tourist and fishing industries. Whereas the understanding of informal economic motivations may make it more difficult for immigrants and non-immigrants to relate to one another, the difficulty of unstable work may work as a bridge between ethnic groups in the community, giving each other a way to identify with one another through a collective sense of “we’re all in this together.” Additionally, despite the assertion by some informal work scholars regarding the correlation between formal job quality, including stability of work hours, and informal economic participation (Nelson and Smith, 1999), I find that it is the *instability* of formal work that increases the opportunity to participate in informal work in this community. During the summer months, when tourism is at its peak and food processing plants and fishing are in full swing, employees are in high demand and people often work 10- to 12-hour days. During the winter months, however, plants are closed, hours at hotels and restaurants are cut, and the fishing season is largely over. As a result, individuals and families rely on multiple livelihood strategies to get them through the low season, including getting governmental and community assistance, cobbling together multiple part time jobs, living on savings from summer employment, moving to other communities with winter seasonal work, and doing informal work. Although some families rely on informal work year round, it was more common to hear that people do informal work when there is not enough formal employment, both because they need the money and because they have the time. Having a “down season” in the industries dominated by immigrants also provides the time for immigrants to study English at the local community college, further assisting the assimilation process.

Finally, there is a widely held belief in the community, particularly among business owners, that Bannock’s economy and wellbeing relies on the work of immigrants and Latinos. Immigrants are differentiated from non-Hispanic, non-immigrant white workers in the minds of these community members by their (assumed) work ethic. Mexican immigrants are seen as hard working, competent, and family oriented in a way that makes them industrious and compliant; white workers, on the other hand, were described as “lazy,” “drug addicts,” and “unreliable.” This characterization was made in terms of both formal employment and informal work. Despite the potential for work competition, however, none of the respondents identified this as a major source of tension between immigrants and non-immigrants in the community. Even those respondents who identified work competition as a larger societal issue in the U.S. did not feel it was a problem in Bannock, because non-Hispanic white, non-immigrant workers simply were not applying to the same positions as Latino and immigrant workers; that work was seen as particularly difficult and of low prestige. The lack of job competition, or even the lack of the *perception* of job competition likely also facilitates assimilation in the community. Non-Hispanic white workers seemed to readily accept Mexican workers, and therefore immigrants more broadly, in the community even when they identified immigration as a major problem in the country.

Conclusion

These findings suggest some ways in which immigrant assimilation in U.S. new destinations might be facilitated or hindered by the social and work networks between and among immigrants in these communities, particularly in nonmetropolitan new destinations and those which may have a strong seasonal aspect to their economy and job opportunities. Being positioned at the nexus of multiple areas of established literature and theory, this research has the ability contribute not only to a better understanding of each of these areas separately, but also how they interact with one another in a way that has not been considered in the past. Understanding how each of these processes – settling in new destinations, participation in the informal economy, and the formation and maintenance of social networks – impact immigrants and communities today is significant for several reasons. Dominant sociological understanding of assimilation is based almost entirely on the experience of immigrants in large urban centers, which may or may not reflect that of immigrants settling in new and nonmetropolitan destinations. If informal work and informal work networks are inaccessible or difficult to develop in new destinations, assimilation in these communities is likely to be delayed or altered. This may necessitate the development of state or local level policies aimed at creating alternative structures to support formal immigrant entrepreneurship. Alternatively, existing formal safety-net programs may need to be expanded or targeted directly at immigrants in these communities. As such, this research can provide insights into both the potential need for policy changes and reconceptualization of assimilation theories that takes into consideration shifting immigration settlement patterns.

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Immigrant assimilation in new destinations: Co- and inter-ethnic networks of informal work in rural Oregon Emily J. Wornell, Pennsylvania State University. Reimagining the rural immigrant in western Canada Kyler C. Zeleny, York University and Ryerson University.Â Oregon Examining the social construction of environment and justice in rural communities: Company towns and class Michelle Larkins, Michigan State University 29 Detailed Agenda Tue Aug 9 â€“ p. 30 9:30 am â€“ 10:45 am Trinity V Food for All? Reforming and modernizing of modern Russian education, searching for new methods, technologies and techniques of the educational process in the work with the younger generation, presented in Russian and foreign pedagogical science, are constantly updated. Hence, we need to appeal to the experience of media education and developing interethnic culture abroad, in particular, in English-speaking countries with a high proportion of migrants where children are taught interethnic tolerance from early preschool age (Derman-Sparks, Edwards, 2009), and then they continue studying social and cultural to Are todayâ€™s immigrants exhibiting less progress toward the cultural and civic mainstream than their predecessors of earlier eras? This basic question was addressed at some length in my 2009 book From Immigrants to Americans: The Rise and Fall of Fitting In. The basic answer. 2.Â The aversion of ethnic riots is not the only social benefit derived from immigrant acceptance of civic institutions.Â Prior studies of assimilation, in summary, have taught us much about how the process works in general, and suggest that conclusions about the process tend to concord across dimensions studied. This pattern supports the approach outlined below, which aggregates. 9.