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Fictive Kinship and Acquaintance Networks as Sources of Support and Social Capital for Mexican Transmigrants in South Bend

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Introduction

Grounded in extensive literature review and primary ethnographic research in the Mexican immigrant community, this research explores the role of social networks as essential sources of support and generators of social capital for Latino immigrants as they adjust to life in the United States. Whereas in U.S. "American" culture, kinship is defined as biogenetic, Latino culture is characteristically more flexible with its interpretation. "Family" includes extended relatives and even close friends who are incorporated into the tightly-knit kin network via fictive kinship relationships. Immigrants cultivate these interpersonal ties, both strong (dense) and weak (diffuse), in an effort to cope with uncertainty and resource scarcity (Granovetter 1973; Wilson 1998; Foner 1999). This study analyzes how the creation of such network bonds and the development of trust-based systems of generalized reciprocity provide immigrants access to key information, resources, and emotional support as they establish themselves in their new community. The cultural traditions of *compadrazgo* (co-parenthood) and the lavish Mexican *fiesta* culture are prime exemplifiers of the dynamic systems of fictive kinship based on generalized reciprocity and mutual obligation. Ultimately, immigrants depend on the size and intensity of their social networks as they develop a

sense of belonging in their new environment, thereby facilitating long-term settlement. This research contributes to a nuanced understanding of these key relationships as they function to unite the community and to replicate nostalgic traditions for Mexican immigrant in their new society.



Individuals cultivate both strong and weak interpersonal ties, developing expansive social networks and building valuable social capital.



*In the Mexican community, the idea of *familismo* (a sense of inclusiveness and participation in family networks) is a prime example of strong tie bonds among extended kin. (Falicov 1998).*

Kinship and the Strength of Ties

As Foner (1999) explained, "Kinship ties are an effective way to cope with uncertainty and economic scarcity." Granovetter (1973) defined the "strength" of an interpersonal tie as being a function of the "amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie." Individuals build and cultivate both strong and weak interpersonal ties, both of which play important roles in the development of expansive social networks and the creation of social capital.

Kinship, cont.

Wilson (1998) described “strong ties” as social relations between Ego and close relatives and friends. These ties constitute a dense network in which members interact frequently, know one another well, and have access to the same shared information such as job opportunities. Dinerman (1978) explained that a household has certain exchange commitments—expectations of generosity and support—to extended relatives, compadres (co-parents), and close friends. For example, many married couples feel a responsibility to take care of their elderly parents. As one young woman who participated in a focus group conducted at National Louis University in Chicago related, she and her husband have a dream of building a house with a big garden and extra rooms for each of their mothers to live with them. Since a large number of Mexican immigrant families are geographically isolated from other relatives, however, there is greater tendency to activate and strengthen weak tie bonds to create a network of fictive kin with whom to share these cultural practices (Stanton-Salazar 2001).

The “strength of weak ties” is centrally important in creating opportunity for economic and social mobility. In a loose-knit network of weak ties, one’s contacts will not know one another, and will also be tied to other individuals, thus providing access to new and different ideas, influences, and information (Granovetter 1973). Additionally, weak ties serve as bridges between dense network clusters, which further expand one’s potential network contacts (Wilson 1998). The importance of word of mouth information exchange cannot be overemphasized. If a good worker recommends a friend or relative, it is often the case that that individual will be hired (Adler 2002). Indeed, perhaps the most meaningful function of this increased access to resources and information is in regard to job opportunities.

Most basically, these diffuse, weak tie interpersonal relationships serve to expand one’s social support network (Chatters 1994). This support is crucial for immigrant families, especially as they attempt to establish themselves in their new community.

As Bott (1971) observed, “No urban family could survive without its network of external relationships.” These external relationships include those forged at work, school, church, the clinic, shops, clubs, evening classes, recreational institutions, and in the neighborhood. Networks are expanded and intensified through the practice of incorporating non-kin—consistent with the concept of structural familism (familismo) discussed by Falicov—to build a tightly-knit extended network of support and security (Stanton-Salazar 2001). By incorporating unrelated individuals into an extended family network, weak ties are converted to strong ties, creating relationships of fictive kinship (Wilson 1998). “Fictive kin” are individuals who, although not related by blood or marriage, are considered to be family. Based on religious ritual or close friendship ties, fictive kinship relationships replicate many of the privileges and responsibilities usually assigned to biological relatives (Kottak 1987; Ebaugh 2000).

Strong Ties	Weak Ties
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social relations between Ego and close relatives and friends (fictive kin) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fictive kin: individuals not related by blood or marriage, but considered to be family • E.g. compadres, “hijos de crianza” • Characterized by high degree of emotional intensity, intimacy (mutual confiding), and reciprocal services <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Caring for elderly parents • Cultural expectation to share time, money, and resources with relatives here and abroad • Members interact frequently, know one another well, and have access to the same shared information such as job opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Between Ego and acquaintances including: coworkers, neighbors, or fellow church members • Function as key sources of new information, influence, and opportunity for immigrants <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • E.g. Word of mouth recommendation • Essential for economic and social mobility • Serve as bridges between dense networks • Community support networks help ease settlement and adjustment process <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • E.g. school, clubs, recreational institutions, work, the neighborhood, church

The Mexican proverb of the crab describes a crab trying to escape from a boiling pot of water. As he tries to get out, the other crabs pull him back in. "If they can't get out, why should he?"



Among the Mexican immigrant community in South Bend, a prevailing spirit of solidarity and support is breaking the mold of the proverb of the crab.

The Community: Networks of Solidarity or Competition?

Though a mentality of solidarity and generosity toward compatriots is quite significant in the Mexican immigrant community, there does exist the risk of jealousy and competition, especially with regard to employment. In his research, Quinones (2007) discovered examples of the phenomenon, which is based on a Mexican proverb of a crab. "When one crab tries to get out of the pot [of boiling water], the others pull him back down; if they can't get out, why should he?" For immigrants from Atolinga, Mexico, the kind of cooperation they experienced in Chicago was surprising to them. "Back home...envidia was rife and pernicious. Envidia means 'envy,' but it also implies backbiting and in commerce, even sabotage" (Quinones 2007).

Envidia and the proverb of the crab function as a type of leveling mechanism, an attempt to socially sanction individual ambition and keep the entire group at a relatively equitable level of achievement. Such a proverb evidences a morality of sharing which is prevalent in the traditionally collectivist Mexican culture. This adage is a notable point of contrast with the exceedingly individualistic U.S. American culture, which includes axioms such as "May the best man (or woman) win" and "The early bird gets the worm" that send an entirely opposite message. Competition is encouraged, and one is thought to be entitled to ownership of that which he or she has earned through hard work.

Among the Mexican immigrant community in South Bend, however, director of La Casa de Amistad Becky Ruvalcaba maintained that the spirit of solidarity was much more prevalent than that of negative competition. "I have noticed that when someone needs a hand, food, a place to stay, especially when it's family or a compadre (co-parent), [community members] will do anything for them. It's that family orientation of helping each other" (Ruvalcaba 2010). Similarly, two families interviewed in the current study also discounted the reality of the proverb of the crab. They asserted that such spiteful behavior is not a widespread sentiment in the community, but rather depends on whether an individual has an envious or overly-competitive personality.

Strengthening a Weak Tie

There are multiple ways to convert a weak tie to a strong tie of fictive kinship, including through long-term friendship cultivated by extended face-to-face interaction over time, or more formally through marriage or the practice of *compadrazgo* (co-parenthood). *Compadrazgo* is an important social practice among Latino cultures in which, through the ceremony of baptizing a child, godparents gain a vital and significant position in the family unit, becoming equivalent to an additional set of parents to the child (Falicov 1998). Important fictive kinship bonds are also forged between the child's parents and godparents. In fact, Ebaugh (2000) commented, "many Mexicans feel closer

to their *compadres* than to their own blood brothers." The importance of fictive kinship relationships is not overlooked by members of the Mexican immigrant community. As one Mexican-American interview participant commented, "I consider some of my friends to be more like my family, and I rely on my friends more in certain situations."

The effort necessary to convert weak acquaintance ties to strong ties of fictive kinship is well-spent. Especially in Latino culture, the work one puts in to maintaining and actively strengthening interpersonal ties is considered productive and a great asset to one's well-being. All of the participants interviewed for this study

emphasized the paramount importance of being a part of a dense network of extended family and close friends. The majority believed that the Mexican/Latino cultural experience of the value of strong social relationships has been effectively transported to and replicated among the immigrant community in South Bend, which has facilitated their adjustment to life in the U.S. Such networks of intensified, strong tie relationships expand and strengthen the group of individuals on whom one can depend for social and economic capital (Ebaugh 2000). Thus, these reciprocal relationships are especially valuable to immigrants as they face the trials of incorporation into a new society.

Social Networks and Social Capital

One of the primary advantages gleaned from membership in both dense (strong) and diffuse (weak) network relationships is the accumulation of social capital. Several scholars have been inspired by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's application of the concept of "capital" to other institutions, including social and cultural capital. Ebaugh (2000) interpreted Bourdieu's definition of social capital as "positions and relationships in groupings and social networks, network ties, and social relations that can serve to enhance an individual's access to opportunities, information, material resources, and social status." Portes (1998) defined social capital as "the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures." In other words, social capital is a means for an individual—

through his or her connectedness in a network of social relationships—to access valuable information and resources which otherwise may not have been available to him or her. Fernandez-Kelly (1994) focused on the emotional advantages of social capital which originate from mutual expectations of reciprocity, trust, and shared feelings of social belonging.

Membership in social networks is also strategic for individuals. Anthropologist Charles Carnegie (1987) described the concept of "strategic flexibility," which implies both an ability to adjust rapidly to whatever challenges an individual may face as well as the means to leverage multiple options—potential capital—in order to mitigate future insecurity. This social insurance is achieved



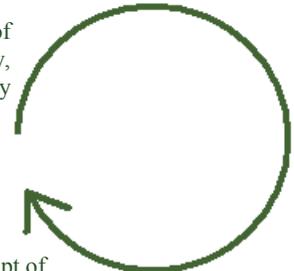
through an individual's network of strong and weak ties. As Fernandez-Kelly (1994) explained, "A balanced mixture of strong and weak ties reduces isolation and increases the likelihood that persons and groups will gain access to assets such as entrepreneurial know-how, jobs and information." Weak ties are of particular value in facilitating individual mobility. While dense networks tend to cycle redundant information through a family network, diffuse acquaintance networks provide unique opportunity as they are sources of new knowledge and resources (Portes 1998).

Generalized Reciprocity

The anthropological concept of "generalized reciprocity" is integral to increasing understanding of the function of social capital and social networks in the Mexican immigrant community. In its most basic definition, reciprocity is exchange between individuals who are normally linked by kinship, marriage, or another close personal tie (Kottak 2006; Adler 2002). Generalized reciprocity is considered the purest form of reciprocity, and is characterized by an expectation that returns will be neither direct nor immediate. Repayment may be tangible or intangible (such as in the form of approval or allegiance), will happen at an unspecified later time, and may come from a source other than the original recipient of the good or service (Portes 1998; Adler 2002). The purpose of such generalized exchanges is not primarily economic, but rather to strengthen and maintain personal

relationships. The idea of generalized reciprocity is at the root of the cultural responsibility felt in the Latino community to care for one's parents and to share such things as food, shelter, and money with extended family members. As one male participant in a focus group of first generation Mexican immigrants at the Instituto del Progreso Latino (IDPL) in Chicago remarked, "You are not the only one who enjoys [your success]. You have to share your good fortune that God has given you. One has to share with one's friends." Another participant in the focus group explained that "One has to always be circulating money" (*Tiene que estar girando el dinero*) among family and even friends in the community. Participants illustrated this concept by imitating the stirring of a large pot, showing the cyclical nature of a collective system of reciprocity.

Initial Act of
Generosity,
Hospitality

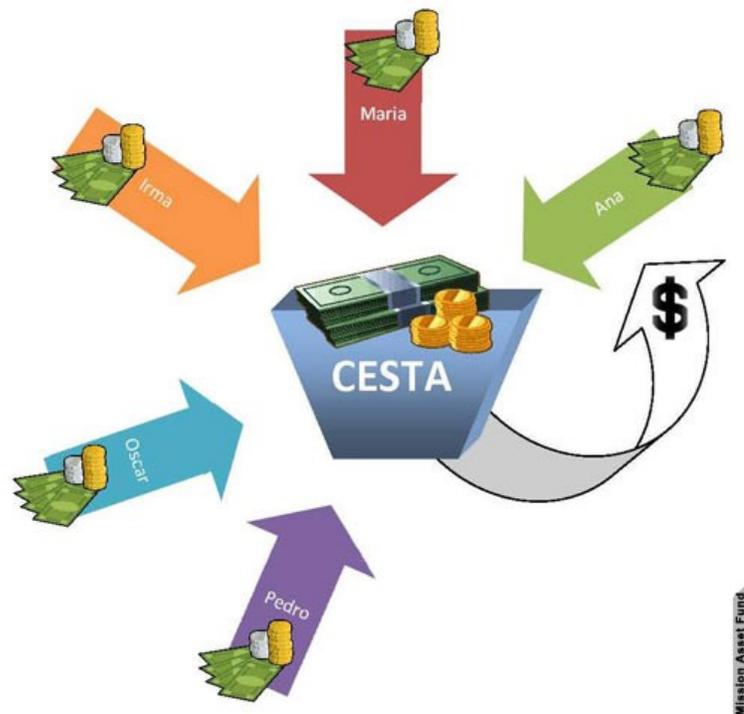


Later Receipt of
Different Act of Generosity,
Hospitality

An exchange in a system of generalized reciprocity is most often considered an investment in redeemable resources since, as Carnegie (1987) related from his research in the Caribbean, "It is possible that a stranger to whom one extends hospitality may be in a position in the near or distant future to reciprocate." By contributing to the generalized pool through acts of generosity and hospitality, individuals and families put themselves in a position of occasionally receiving from it as well. Systems of

Generalized Reciprocity, cont.

generalized reciprocity are especially valuable among immigrant communities. As Foner (1999) observed, immigrants pool their resources as a way to advance. One manifestation of the collective sharing of resources, and a key example of leveraging social capital to gain economic capital, is that of the rotating credit association, called a *tanda*. Rotating credit associations are informal groups comprised of a variable number of participants who meet periodically to contribute a set amount of money to a common fund which is given to each participant in rotation (Kurtz and Showman 1978; Portes 1998). Rotating credit associations have several advantages for those who participate in them. They provide a certain degree of economic security to meet both expected and unexpected needs. “The short cycle of the *tanda* relieves the economic strain of a prolonged wait for the fund which is characteristic of commercial associations.” (Kurtz and Showman 1978). For immigrants trying to establish themselves in their new environment, *tandas* can provide a valued source of funds to facilitate the settlement process, especially since many Mexicans resent and are suspicious of the impersonality of banks. *Confianza* (trust) is a key element in systems of generalized exchange.



In a tanda, participants meet periodically to contribute a set amount of money to a common fund which is given to each participant in rotation. Funds received from a tanda are useful for covering both expected and unexpected expenses.

Since returns are delayed and indirect, social capital originates from the trust each participant places in the other members of his or her social network. For example, the success of the Mexican custom of the *tanda* is based on the trust each contributor has that the other participants will continue to put in

funds even after they receive the pooled money (Portes 1998). In fictive kin relationships, such as that of *compadrazgo*, trust is the foundation of the bond. Social capital is gained from the security of knowing one always has someone on whom to rely.

Cultural Manifestations of Fictive Kinship and Social Capital in the Mexican Community

Compadrazgo

One of, if not *the* most important relationships in Mexican culture—and in Latino culture as a whole—is that of *compadrazgo* (co-parenthood). *Compadres* (co-fathers) and *comadres* (co-mothers) “play an important role in the social and affectional development of the Hispanic family” (Carrasquillo 1991). The ritual practice of *compadrazgo* helps to formalize ties of

friendship, and *compadres* are very important individuals for the family. Created through the religious ceremony of baptizing a child, these fictive kinship bonds of “ritual co-parenthood” are considered sacred (Mintz and Wolf 1950; Carlos 1973). In the forging of a *compadrazgo* relationship, two main sets of bonds are formed: (1) between the child and his or her godparents; and (2) between the child’s biological parents and the

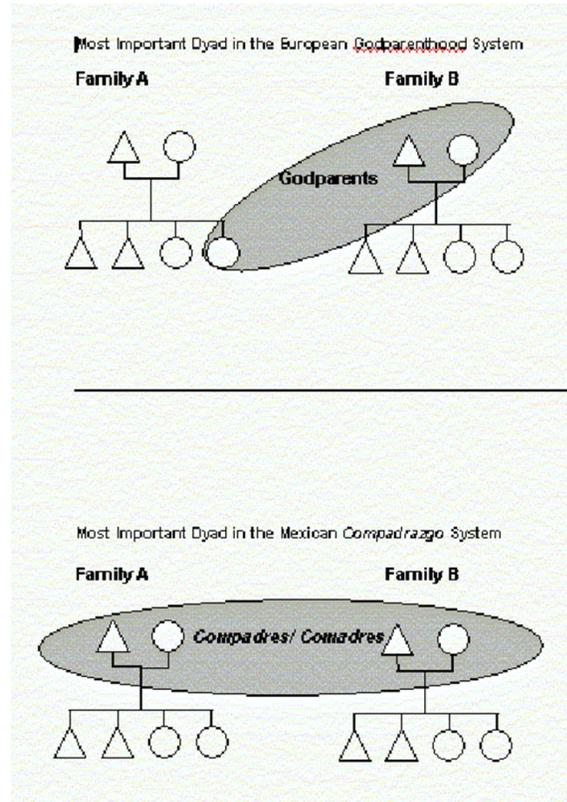
child’s godparents (Ebaugh 2000). As anthropologist Manuel Carlos (1973) explained, “*Padrinos* [godparents] are therefore asked and must accept to serve as both godparents and *compadres*, thus acquiring a set of social and religious ties to the child and parents of the child sponsored in a given ceremony. However, it is the relationship between *compadres* and the reciprocal duties and obligations they acquire which are on the whole more socially

Compadrazgo, cont.

and economically significant. The adults address one another using the special kin term of “compadre” or “comadre” instead of calling each other by their given names (Carrasquillo 1991). This shows a heightened level of respect that supersedes even that between close blood relations. While the child is the “glue” holding the bond together—the object of the relationship and the reason for its existence—the bond between compadres is even stronger because it creates a special set of mutual obligations between peers which provides an important safety net of emotional and economic insurance.

Choosing Compadres

The selection of compadres is a very important one, and follows certain common guidelines. For example, qualities that parents seek in a padrino for their child—and a compadre for themselves—include trustworthiness, a good reputation as a respectable and responsible citizen. As father César and parents Cristián and Yesenia explained, “It is important to choose a compadre or comadre who is a good person, not a drunk who just likes to drink and party. This person will be another parent for my child and, therefore, needs to be a good influence.” According to Mintz and Wolf (1950), compadrazgo bonds may be used either to extend numerically the number of ritually related kin, or to reinforce or intensify already existing blood or ritual ties. Frequently, parents will select compadres as a way to publicly recognize and strengthen a pre-existing friendship. Though it is common to choose a non-relative to be a compadre—thus converting a weak interpersonal tie to a strong tie of fictive kinship—parents sometimes choose a relative, such as the aunt or uncle of the baby, to serve as godparents. Choosing a relative, who already has a strong tie to the child, is a way for parents to further intensify the sense of mutual obligation and responsibility that already exists between close relatives. For immigrants who may have few relatives nearby, choosing, for example, a sibling who also lives in the



“While child is the ‘glue’ holding the bond together, the bond between compadres is even more significant as it functions to create a special set of mutual obligations between peers.”

United States to be a compadre reinforces the existing strong bond and provides extra insurance of the family support and loyalty that may otherwise be lacking in their new and uncertain environment.

The Significance of the Compadre Relationship: What Makes it Unique?

As two participants, Colombian father-of-three César and Mexican mother-of-four Yesenia commented, an increased level of respect is what makes a relationship between compadres special. With this increased level of respect also comes a heightened sense of obligation to and responsibility for ones compadres and *ahijado/a* (godchild) which are religious, social, and economic in nature. For example, in a typical compadrazgo relationship, two comadres should visit each other often, *borrowing things from each other and providing material or emotional assistance whenever necessary* [emphasis added]. The close connection between compadres obliges each to a code of hospitality, honesty, and responsibilities which is

most conscientiously upheld. The relationship is structured to be an ongoing process, a never-ending cycle of giving and receiving both material and emotional support according to cultural expectations of reciprocity. As Mintz and Wolf (1950) related, even people who have “no conscience at all for the rest of the world” and may cheat even their own family members will always do right by their compadres. By regulating relationships and interactions through assigning a varying degree of sanctity, status, and expectation, the practice of compadrazgo stabilizes the immediate social environment, providing more security and affording an increased degree of interdependence for participants. In instances where the nuclear family is geographically isolated from biological kin, converting weak tie bonds among non-relatives to strong fictive kinship ties via the practice of compadrazgo affords families increased economic and emotional security and support.

Three Narratives of Compadrazgo Relationships in South Bend

The theoretical discussions detailing the central importance of compadrazgo relationships as sources of social support are enriched by three ethnographic examples from personal interviews conducted with Mexican-Americans and Mexican transmigrants in the South Bend community.

Becky Ruvalcaba, Director of La Casa de Amistad, Third Generation Mexican-American

Though Becky and her husband (a first-generation immigrant from Mexico) do not have children of their own, they are padrinos (godparents) to four of the five children of a couple with whom they have a very close fictive kinship bond.

“When we baptized their children, it was always in a sense that you choose someone to be a part of your family, it’s in that word choosing. When we’re born into a family, there’s no choice, we’re blood, there’s a relationship, there’s a love you have for that person for being your blood relative, but in regards to a compadre you are choosing someone that is a representation of who you are or an extended representation of something that you want your children to be exposed to. It [the compadrazgo bond] has that spiritual representation too...of what it is to be Catholic, to go to Church, to make sure the kids go to Catechism, to make sure they are getting that good role model.”

“Our compadres—as well as my husband—came from Mexico, and when they first got here we were their first connection to the area, and they lived with us in our home for a year. So, when they started having their children it was almost like, as my compadre Esteban said, ‘Giving you my first child is more than just a thank you for what you’ve done for us but is a connection we will have for the rest of our lives.’”

“It goes beyond friendship, it goes beyond sisterhood or brotherhood, it’s something spiritual.”

Cristián and Yesenia, First Generation Mexican Immigrants

Cristián and Yesenia arrived in the United States fourteen and ten years ago, respectively, and have four children that were all born in the United States. Cristián and Yesenia, have an extremely close relationship with their compadres who live in Chicago. They see each other once a month, at the very least. A central purpose of the compadre relationship, they said, is to have this very type of long-lasting and close relationship with the child. The child should consider his or her padrino and madrina to be additional parents.

Compadres are addressed with the polite “Usted,” even if they are family members (Mintz and Wolf 1950). Yesenia explained that if she had multiple sisters and chose one to be godmother to her child, she would address that sister in the “Usted” form and call her “comadre” instead of by her given name. She would address her other sisters in the more informal “tú” form. Likewise, her child would address his godmother as “madrina” and his other aunts as “tía.”



“In Mexico, a compadre bond is very strong and long lasting. It is very important and very much valued socially. The importance of the compadrazgo bond and that culture in Mexico translates across borders to South Bend as well.”
-Cristián

Narratives, cont.

Roberto and Juana, First Generation Mexican Immigrants

Roberto and Juana are first generation immigrants to the United States from Mexico City and Michoacán, respectively. Roberto migrated first to California fourteen years ago, and at the suggestion of a friend, relocated to South Bend to find work. Juana arrived in Chicago fifteen years ago, following a brother who had migrated a few years prior. When her brother relocated to South Bend, Juana followed, hoping to find better prospects for employment. She and Roberto met in South Bend, and have lived in a “marriage-like relationship” for several years. They have two children, ages 7 and 6, both born in South Bend. Though among all of the participants in this study they are the couple that has been in the United States the longest, Roberto and Juana are the least established and settled in the ‘American’ community. They have the most minimal social network and limited community bonds.

Roberto and Juana chose a set of neighbors to be godparents, but this particular example of *compadrazgo* is atypical. In this instance, the neighbors serve in more of a representative role, effectively “standing in” for Roberto’s sister in Mexico and Juana’s brother, whom they say are the true *padrino* and *madrina* of the children. Roberto explained that they chose the neighbors because it is important that the children know and have a relationship with their godparents. Since Roberto’s sister lives in Mexico, she cannot have a face-to-face relationship with the children; in fact, she has never even met them. They say that they chose their neighbors to be godparents because “they were what we had at hand” (*Eran los que habían a mano*). In contrast to the perspectives of the other couples interviewed, Roberto and Juana seem to have a cynical view of the advantageous nature of the *compadrazgo* relationship.

*“Supposedly the role is to guide children in the religion that one has. We are Catholics. And allegedly the principal function that godparents should have with respect to their godchildren is to ensure they are raised as good Catholics. If the parents decide to stop being practicing Catholics, the godparents are supposed to take responsibility to raise the children in the ways of the Church. But this is just a saying because in actuality, godparents almost forget about their godchildren. In actuality, having a godparent is only for the party. And when the party is over, the *compadre* relationship is over.” -Roberto*

The Mexican Fiesta Culture

“Literally, the entire community may be involved. Weddings in Mexico, for example, can involve as many as 900 guests. Therefore, there is a need to petition outside help to diffuse the economic burden across several people.”

Another important mechanism for creating and maintaining social networks and gaining social capital is the “fiesta culture” which is prevalent among the Mexican community. The Mexican fiesta culture describes the involvement of extended relatives, *compadres*, friends, and community members as sponsors for certain aspects of an important family celebration. In a wedding, for example, *padrinos* are selected for various parts of the ceremony including the dress, the veil, the rings, and food for the reception. The practice of inviting others to participate in important events such as quinceañeras, weddings, baby showers, and graduations

through financial or other contributions is a key manifestation of themes of generalized reciprocity, collectivist cultural mentality, and social capital.

Similar to the function of the *compadrazgo* relationship formed in the baptism of child, the practice of asking someone to serve as a *padrino* of a part of an important fiesta is a form of social insurance for a family. As Mintz and Wolf (1950) observed, “Few are the families which can meet all emergencies without outside help. Often this means manual help at the time of a fiesta...Sometimes it means lending money.” Since these fiestas are such important occasions for the extended family and community,

families do feel a certain cultural pressure to host large and lavish parties. It is important to emphasize just how large these celebrations actually are; literally, the entire community may be involved. Weddings in Mexico, for example, can involve as many as 900 guests. Therefore, there is a need to petition outside help to diffuse the economic burden across several people. As Cristián commented, “You ask someone to sponsor a certain part of the party so that one person or family does not feel burdened to pay for the whole thing.”

Usually, family and close friends are the ones who contribute. In the film “Quinceañera,” for example, the main character Magdalena

Mexican Fiesta Culture, cont.

wants to have a Hummer limo just like her cousin Eileen had on her quinceañera, but her family cannot afford it. “Don’t worry,” her mother reassures her, “We will find someone to padrino it” (Glatzer 2006). As this example demonstrates, contributions are by no means insignificant. Often, the cost to padrino something is very large, sometimes exceeding US\$600. This amount is much more than what is usually spent on a typical wedding gift. In fact, sometimes the padrino has to borrow money in order to oblige the request. It is also interesting to note the use of the word “padrino” as a verb, meaning “to godfather,” which evidences the truly dynamic nature of the act of reciprocity and the important strong tie bond which is formed as a result.

Aside from the social capital one gains by participating as a sponsor to a fiesta, another advantage of the fiesta culture is that it strengthens social networks, both weak and strong ties, by involving the community in the celebration. Similar to the bonds between godparents and a godchild, sponsoring a part of an important event in a person’s life strengthens interpersonal ties and publicly recognizes the significance of “strong tie” extended or fictive kin relationships. From a functional perspective, the fiesta culture serves as a means of redistribution in the community and as a way to preserve vibrant cultural traditions from the home country.



“I believe that sometimes they do get totally out of control. When you start getting into the earrings, the shoes, the dress, etc, for me it becomes like trying to get people to pay for something that you can’t really afford. Once you have all those other things, that’s where it starts going wrong to where it takes away from its true importance.”
 -Becky Ruvalcaba, speaking about the over-materialization of the fiesta culture

- Advantages of the Mexican fiesta culture:
1. Ability to host larger parties than would otherwise be possible
 2. Spread the economic burden associated with hosting these important events
 3. Opportunity for an individual or family to build social capital with others in the community or kin group, fulfilling the cultural obligation to contribute to a system of generalized reciprocity
 4. Ability to involve the larger community in important family celebrations, promoting unity and social cohesion

Above: Photo from a quinceañera. The birthday girl surrounded by her damas and chambalanes (escorts).
 Below (clockwise from left): Lavish decorations at a quinceañera, wedding, and first communion. Mexican fiestas are truly very large and lavish affairs.
 Far below: A quinceañera enters her reception.



“Invented Traditions”

Very often, the events which the fiestas celebrate have important religious significance; however, many of the participants in this study fear that the true meaning of the important events such as marriages and quinceañeras is being overshadowed by the material and ceremonial concerns of the fiesta. One contributor to the commercialization of the fiesta culture among Mexican immigrants in the U.S. is the concept of “invented traditions,” which implies a certain nostalgia for the home country, idealizing and intensifying its traditions. Such imagined ideas of life in Mexico affect immigrants’ perspectives when replicating those cultural patterns and traditions in an American context. As Foner (1999) explained, immigrants “construct their own versions of tradition as they reconceptualize the past to make sense of current experience and to speak to current dilemmas and issues.”

In an effort to preserve their Mexican culture and to resist assimilation and the imposition of “American” traditions, immigrants create an idealized memory of cultural traditions from their home country. “People make something up and call it tradition,” first-generation immigrant Martín Andrés commented. Amidst the attempt to replicate the extended family celebrations associated with celebration in Mexico, rituals are incorporated which lack any identifiable religious significance and which inadvertently diminish the true meaning of the momentous event.



Transmitting Cultural Knowledge to Children

In the immigrant experience, transmitting Mexican culture to younger generations—especially those born in the United States—is extremely important to parents as they strive to preserve traditions from their homeland in their new environment. Kottak (1987) explained that the process of “enculturation” (cultural learning) effectively begins at birth. Through interaction with others, a person consciously and unconsciously incorporates and internalizes cultural traditions, which define the way in which one views one’s world, makes judgments, and expresses feelings. Generally, the transmission of cultural knowledge and norms with regard to social interactions, bonds, and networks is very much implicit, as parents had trouble describing how they learned about or how they would teach certain customs to their children. Most of the learning that occurs is through observation and following the example of others. For example, one female participant in the Chicago focus group explained that she believes it is her responsibility to take care of her mother because she saw her own mother take care of her grandmother (Focus Group Participant, Karen Richman, March 24, 2010). Contributing to a fiesta is another way to inculcate cultural traditions in younger generations. In doing so, one models to children the cultural expectations and functions of maintaining and strengthening social networks and relationships. Metaphors are also useful tools for transmitting cultural knowledge and teaching morals. A popular metaphor in the Caribbean, for example, illustrates the potential advantages of engaging in generalized reciprocity: “What you give with the right hand you get back with the left” (Carnegie 1987). Through the use of such metaphors, of leading by example, observation, and the explicit imparting of knowledge from parents and elders to children, cultural codes of hospitality and interpersonal relations gradually emerge over time.

Conclusions

Challenges to Social Incorporation in a New Community

“Despite the negative experiences, status, and harsh economic conditions, if immigrants perceive or imagine themselves to be part of an American community, their orientation will be not that of a sojourner but that of a settler.”

(Chavez 1994)

Roberto and Juana have lived in the U.S. longer than any of the other couples who were interviewed, but they are the least established and have a relatively minimal, even barely existent, social network. They do not feel welcome in or a part of the community in the U.S., and are very nostalgic for life in Mexico. Roberto often used the Spanish word *convivir*—which translates literally to “live with,” meaning to actively share experiences and spend quality time with others—to describe his social involvement in Mexico. There he felt an important and active part of the community and social network, while in the U.S. he does not. Thus, Roberto and Juana are just waiting for circumstances to allow them to go back to Mexico. “I am quite desperate to go back to Mexico. I am extremely bored

with life here. I am frustrated. I feel melancholy here. In Mexico, my mood was much better. I want to go now.”

Roberto and Juana are facing several serious hindrances to fully engaging in the social networks and forming the fictive kinship bonds which would help them to better establish themselves and feel more welcome in their U.S. community. First, since both Roberto and Juana are unemployed, they are unable to form relationships with co-workers which, in addition to a sense of solidarity, would provide “the strength of weak ties”—information and, potentially, even economic resources (Menjivar 1995). Second, their limited knowledge of English prevents them from forging meaningful relationships with non-Hispanics in their

community and creates obstacles in their daily life. They explained, “Very rarely are we invited to an American party. When we do go, we feel like a fly on the cake (*una mancha en un pastel*) [completely out of place].” Third, although they currently live with Juana’s brother due to financial hardship, they feel quite isolated from friends and family. This loneliness even affected their decision about whether or not to legally marry. The couple currently live in a “marriage-like relationship” and never officially married because they did not have anyone to celebrate with. “There would have been no one to come to the party,” Juana explained. When they return to live in Mexico, they would like to marry in the church and celebrate with family and friends there.

Challenges, cont.

Roberto and Juana’s experience exemplifies the perspective of a “sojourner” instead of a “settler.” Fernandez-Kelly (1994) described that many Mexicans see moving to the United States as a short-term decision, influenced by economic circumstances. They maintain that their true homes and hearts are still in Mexico. This mentality diminishes their motivation to seek involvement in the community or to plant any sort of roots in the United States. Chavez (1994) provided a more theoretical framework for explaining the phenomenon by distinguishing a short-term sojourner from a long-term settler. “[The sojourner] has little contact with the larger society and lives for the moment of return migration. In contrast, settlers were those whose orientation had shifted from their places of origin to their new communities.” Immigrants who have the self-perception that they are part of the community are almost four times as likely to stay in the United States as those who do not feel part of the community (Chavez 1994).

One mechanism for establishing oneself in a new community is to migrate to an area where one already knows someone, thereby replicating somewhat the social networks and solidar-

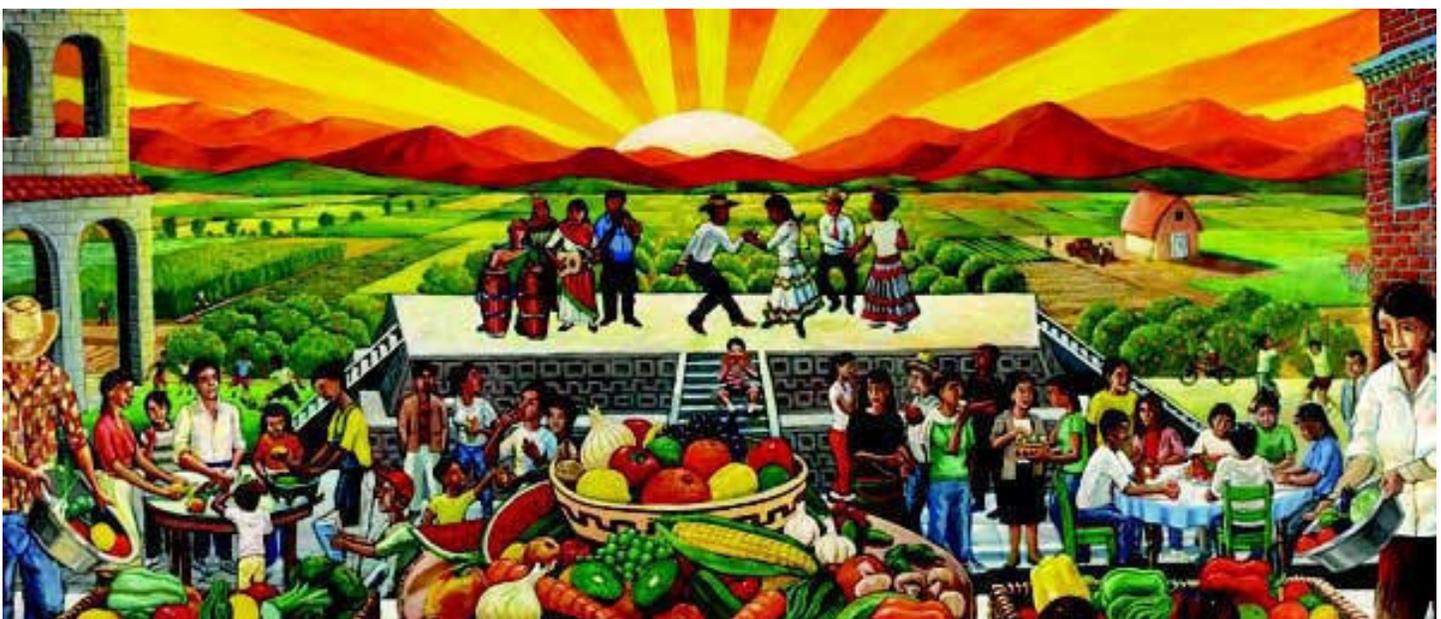
ity of the home community. For example, Martín Andrés described a particular Catholic parish community in Bremen, Indiana—a town about 20 miles from South Bend—which is a very tightly knit network of support and solidarity for Mexican immigrants in the area. Martín Andrés explained that many of the residents in Bremen migrated from the same town in Mexico about 10-15 years ago when there were several available jobs. Through word of mouth recommendations both to prospective migrants at home and labor managers in Bremen (utilizing weak tie bonds to create bridges of communication and expand information networks across borders), the first few families who arrived attracted several additional families from their hometown in Mexico to join them in the U.S. Thus, the vast majority of the current parishioners at the Catholic church in Bremen are related or already knew one another from the home city in Mexico. In a sense, the social and community support network of strong ties was already in existence—at least somewhat—in Mexico, and has since been intensified and expanded as many in the community have migrated to Bremen. These strong ties stretch across borders. Similar to the case of Bremen, the community of Plymouth, Indiana, is

linked through “chain migration” as a “sister community” to the town of Santiago Capitiro, Mexico, via a network of both strong and weak interpersonal ties among residents who migrated from that town. Such preexisting strong tie networks between communities across borders greatly facilitate immigrant integration and settlement into the new home community.



“Immigrants who have the self-perception that they are part of the community are almost four times as likely to stay in the United States as those who do not feel part of the community”
(Chavez 1994)

Below: A mural in Orange County, CA, depicts the strength of community networks.



For more information, please consult:

Jelm, Erin

2010 "Fictive Kinship and Acquaintance Networks as Sources of Support and Social Capital for Mexican Transmigrants in South Bend." Senior Honors Thesis, Department of Anthropology, University of Notre Dame.

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