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Community Formation Within a Non-profit, Latina/o Community-Based Organization

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2015
Claremont Colleges Library
Undergraduate Research Award

Sophomore Award Winner

Esther Cheung
Pomona College

Reflective Essay

Reflective Essay: In Constant Dialogue

Through writing this research paper as a part of my Qualitative Methods class, I have consequently learned so much in regards to the importance of research that remains "in dialogue" with literature, theory, data, professors, librarians, peers, and respondents. I had already worked for over a year with the organization that I decided to study, and through my first sociology class, I began to think about the ways that the low-income, Latina/o families in the organization were affected in their everyday lives by macrostructural processes of racialization, immigration, and economic structure. As I connected my personal interests with my academic work, I decided to focus my research project on the families within this organization, which I have named Building Bridges. Thinking about readings in my previous sociology classes written by Leslie Abrego and Gilda Ochoa, who study immigration and the Latina/o experience in the United States, I was curious as to how the families at Building Bridges navigated their experiences as immigrants.

In my Qualitative Methods class, I learned about the process of research through readings about methodology, practical guides for researchers, and the research of renowned sociologists. From Robert Weiss's *Learning From Strangers* to Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw's *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, these resources shaped the questions I began drawing from my fieldwork, and many of these books were borrowed through the library or via the digital copies available online through the library's databases. As I learned from the professor of my class, Professor Hung Cam Thai, I began thinking about the ways that my research nuanced or built on past research—constantly remaining "in dialogue," as he would describe it, with the existing literature relevant to my research.

As I began trying to build the sources for my literature review, I went with my class to the Keck Learning Room, where the sociology reference librarian, Cindy Snyder, led a workshop on how to use the library's databases. While she emphasized the importance of search terms, I thought of terms like "immigration," "Latinos," "Southern California," and "working class." Although I found articles about the history of Latinas/os in Southern California, I quickly learned that my search terms were not as

effective as they needed to be. Professor Thai explained how all of my articles only contextualized my research--they did not provide an analytical storyline necessary for sociological research.

As I shared with Professor Thai my initial observations of my families and of Building Bridges, he suggested that I focus more on the role that this organization had in the lives of my families and recommended that I read Nina Eliasoph's work studying non-profit organizations. With the library's resources, I was able to obtain the book rather quickly through the Interlibrary Loans and talk to the on-call librarians for help in finding other resources about non-profits. This was a key moment in my research because reading about non-profit organizations eventually led me to discover a plethora of research about community-based organizations that served marginalized populations similar to Building Bridges. Although I was scared for a long time because I felt like I had no idea where my research was going, it was a relief to see connections between my own research and that of Hector Cordero-Guzman, Tara Yosso, Glenn Jacobs, Michael Lawson, and Tania Alameda-Lawson. Alongside my ongoing fieldwork, I began to see how community formed in the space of Building Bridges, and I began reading about Miller McPherson's concept of homophily and Chavis's theories on community formation.

While Professor Thai guided and redirected my project constantly, on-call librarians at the library helped me find relevant books and answered last-minute, frantic questions via the online chat. On top of all the literature databases I learned how to use, a librarian also taught me how to find relevant census data using the U.S. Census Bureau's website. In order to connect things I was seeing in my field notes and interviews with the theories that I was reading Professor Thai, the librarians, and my peers gave me a space to verbally process my research project. Synthesizing all of the literature and analytical knowledge that I had gained, my final paper has become a culmination of my engagement with multiple forms of resources. Through this project, I have understood how collaboration and community support are key not only in the lives of low-income, Latina/o immigrants but in my research, as well.

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Research Project

"Community Formation Within a Non-profit,
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Community Formation within a Non-profit,

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Abstract: This study explores the role that a Southern-California nonprofit, community-based organization, called Building Bridges, plays in the lives of low-income, Mexican immigrants. Using participant observations of the different events and gatherings at the site combined with several interviews conducted with parents, students, and staff, this study analyzes the process by which families enter Building Bridges and create a sense of community. Results revealed the significance of homophily in the way the organization initially earns the trust of the families that are trying their programs; the services that meet the perceived needs and aspirations of the community; and the impact of immigrant narratives that are integrated into the organization's programming in a way that draws meaningful connections between the core group members in the community at Building Bridges. These processes are strong enough to overpower the forces of dominant social and cultural capital that conflict with many of the counter-hegemonic spaces of safety and understanding that Building Bridges has developed.

Key Words: Mexican, Latina/o, immigrants, nonprofits, community-based organizations

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Introduction

  With immigration policy at the forefront of U.S. conversations, a survey of the landscape in which immigrants enter and the services that are provided to them by federal, state, and local governments, for-profit organizations, and nonprofit organizations is crucial to a comprehensive understanding of immigration issues. This project aims to understand a Southern California nonprofit Latina/o community-based organization called Building Bridges as it intercepts the lives of mostly first-generation Mexican immigrant families and to analyze the community that forms as a result of the multiple spaces within the nonprofit.

  This paper delineates the decline of state funding and the positions of nonprofits, analyzes the relationship between community-based organizations (CBOs) and Americanization, and asserts the intersecting analytics of community formation, boundaries, and homophily in order to understand how families navigate their experiences with Building Bridges to create community. I will also provide a statistical and demographic backdrop for the city in which many of the participants live, and I will contextualize their lives as low-wage immigrants. There is a dearth of research on the impacts that community-based organizations have on the personal and public lives of Latina/o immigrants, and this project seeks to deepen the understanding of how crucial these spaces are for them.

  I spent ten-weeks visiting the site, building relationships with the people I met, and conducting interviews. In the following pages, I will provide the backdrop of what the Building Bridges office looks like and the programs it coordinates. I will analyze my data to show how community formation is defined by the various ways individuals choose to enmesh their "home" (private lives) and "work" (public lives within the organization), resulting in relationships of homophily—based on shared experiences as immigrants and Latina/os. Despite the lack of

political awareness within the Building Bridges programming, I argue that the homophily families encounter when they enter Building Bridges develops initial trust for the organization, the services that engage in transfers of social and cultural capital develop a deeper trust and gratitude for the organization, and the close proximity of individuals work together to create the relationships that form a strong, meaningful community.

Background

The work that Latina/o or immigrant serving nonprofits do is closely tied to the history of immigration and of U.S.-Mexico relations. Important to the history of immigration is its key role in "colonialism, industrialization, and nation-building" (Castles, 2002). As a reflection of the hourglass economy that defines the United States today, most immigrants can be categorized as hi-skilled migrants, encouraged in the 1980s, and unskilled migrants, who were important to the U.S. post-1945 industrial growth and who do the "dirty, demanding and dangerous" jobs in the United States (Castles, 2002). By the 1980s, the Americas became the main source of immigration to the United States (Deaux, 2006), and most migration from Latin American countries to the United States is due to income disparities between the two countries and is "part of family and community survival strategies," (Castle, 2002; Massey et al., 1987). However, for Mexican immigrants, like those in Building Bridges, there is little evidence of economic assimilation (improvement in wages over time)—especially for immigrants who enter the United States at a young age (Borjas, 2007). Because Mexican immigrants have such low education levels, this deficit in human capital accounts for "nearly three-quarters of the very large wage disadvantage suffered by Mexican immigrants in recent decades" (Borjas, 2007).

From 1970 to 1990 and then to 2010, the Pomona-Ontario area became increasingly concentrated with Latinas/os, as whites moved to newer suburbs (Pulido and Pastor, 2013).

Southern Californian Latinos are mostly low-income although there is also a strong middle class (Massey et al., 1987; Pulido and Pastor, 2013). By the 1990s, the southern California region had become defined by working poverty—characterized by families who "are Latino, foreign born, work in service or laborer occupations, have lower educational attainment and very low unionization rates, and earn hourly wages close to the legal minimum" (Joassart-Marcelli, 2005). By 2000, Mexican-born immigrants made up 14.8 percent of the California workforce (Borjas, 2007), and because of many established migrant networks, California—specifically, the Los Angeles area—has been and continues to be a key destination for many Mexican migrants (Massey et al., 1987). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2006-2010), per capita income for the total population in Pomona, CA was $16,682, while for Whites, it was $17,479; for Black or African Americans, it was about $22,933; for Asians, it was $19,922; for Mexicans, it was about $13,473. These are the people for whom I focus this paper.

In these contexts of immigration, Latino community-based organizations have necessarily proliferated, which act as "institutional mechanisms that facilitate the formation and maintenance of social ties… [and a] variety of voluntary associations established by immigrants in the United States [that] promote regular interpersonal contact, greatly facilitating the process of adaptation and mutual assistance" (Massey et al., 1987, p. 145).

Review of Literature

Chavis (1990) explains how community is developed by a combination of factors: how individuals perceive their environments influences how safe they feel in interacting with others and then participating in the community; social relations and emotional connections that support the individuals and supplement the organization's work; how individuals feel they are given more of a sense of control over their own lives and their communities. Within communities,

individuals feel a sense of membership that entails a sense of belonging, influence that creates a sense of importance, integration and fulfillment of needs by other people in the community, and a shared emotional connection that members share based on common histories, places, time together, and experiences (McMillan and Chavis, 1986). As immigrants perceive these different aspects of their environment and of the CBO, some choose to engage in a community space that is welcoming and understanding of their experiences, and especially those in which there are shared experiences of culture and ethnicity.

Existing research underscores the role of homophily in building trust. In Lawson and Alameda-Lawson's case study of school-linked, collective parent engagement (2012), they explored a community-based organization's efforts at engaging low-income Latina/o parents in collaborating with schools to identify problems that they would then craft solutions for. They created a specific environment "sensitive to parents' prior histories, knowledge, and/or experience" (Lawson and Alameda-Lawson, 2012, p. 677). As these parents met and began to develop social capital through their interactions with other parents, they shared their experiences with border crossing, trauma, isolation, and lack of access to support in addition to engaging in *chisme* (gossip) (Lawson and Alameda-Lawson, 2012; Martinez-Cosio and Iannacone, 2007). The community-based organization provided educational activities for their students as the parents met—an important part of engaging parents. Increasingly as the parents interacted at the program site, group cohesion and trust increased, and there began to be reciprocal exchanges of goods and services among them. The parents were a part of recruiting and drawing in other families within the community. Trust and communication are key in creating successful community-based organizations. Lewis and Forman (2002) assert the importance of "a type of collaborative relationship between parents and teachers that will encourage mutual respect and

inspire dialogue" (p. 83). With communication, schools ought to be constantly talking to parents about what they want in order to better serve them (Lawson and Alameda-Lawson, 2012; Lewis and Forman, 2002).

In their analysis, Lawson and Alameda-Lawson describe the Psychological Sense of Community that began to develop as a result of individual perceptions of their own influence, rewards for individual participation, and shared emotional connection (Lawson and Alameda-Lawson, 2012; Sarason, 1974). They frame the relationships that parents develop as bonding (horizontally with each other) and bridging (vertically between disparate groups). The researchers acknowledge that although for the individuals in the program "several barriers and resource constraints (e.g., parent and child isolation, family stress, and cultural and linguistic differences)" were reduced (2012, p. 681), this program was unable to address the larger systems in issues of immigration or documentation. This paper draws mainly from this study as well as the theories of Chavis and McMillan (1986) as the basic framework for how community is formed within CBOs: building trust, fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection.

The immigrant experience enters community-based organizations through a process of integrating the boundaries of private and public spheres. Through the space that CBOs create, community formation occurs based on the shared status and experiences of individuals within the community. While what Pettigrew (1997) terms as the meso level of personality and social structure involves the social interactions and social networks in which immigrants are involved, the micro level involves a "context that is defined broadly by elements of policy and social representations and that is permeated by more targeted attitudes and stereotypes about their condition and their group" (Deaux, 2006, p. 7; Pettigrew 1997). Deaux describes how immigrant identities consist of a "psychological suitcase" containing expectations for the place to which

they are emigrating and memories from the place they are leaving. These expectations include hopes about "what the new country will provide and how one will establish a life for oneself, and in many cases one's family," and these memories are comprised of "people and places of one's origin" (Deaux, 2006, p. 7). As immigrants interact in the meso level of the CBO, the micro level of their immigrant identity enters.

Status homophily indicates formal, informal, or ascribed likenesses that draw people into community with each other, and value homophily indicates similar values, attitudes, and beliefs (Lazarfeld and Merton, 1954; McPherson et al., 2001). Homophily manifests in organizational networks and communities within a "core-periphery pattern" in which the core group is tightly connected while the periphery groups are not as connected to other members (Brass, 1985; McPherson, 2001). Attitude, belief, and value similarity lead to attraction and interaction (McPherson, 2001). Communities form on the basis of perceived sameness.

In her analysis of the boundaries that employees at a research laboratory in the Northeast United States create, Nippert-Eng (2010) delineates the amount of integration and segmentation that individuals create in the various spaces of their lives. In the context of how much discretion individuals have over their home and work lives, boundary work includes boundary placement and transcendence—what people, objects, surroundings, mental processes, and ways of being belong in one or multiple spaces, and how individuals move from space to space. Changing constraints for what individuals constitute as home and work is subjected to significant life events and formal and informal rules. While she acknowledges that the separation of home and work are social constructions, the boundaries that people draw create the social settings in which community and relationships will form. Nippert-Eng focuses on the formation of boundaries between work and home, but I posit that this "boundary work" can also illustrate how people's

lives are affected when segmentation or integration takes place within the social context of the CBO.Deaux's analysis of immigrant experiences, in combination with the boundaries they draw between their lives inside and outside of the CBO, provides the place for homophily to form.

In many ways, CBOs provide the social capital and cultural capital for immigrants to successfully navigate the U.S. systems that privilege knowledge and capital held by the white, upper-middle class (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2011; Yosso, 2005). Social capital involves networks of relationships and group relations that people develop, and cultural capital involves education, language, and forms of knowledge. Some CBOs are formed with racist assumptions, even under the best intentions, because of the terms by which "Americanization" occurs. Yosso (2005) calls the privileging of white, upper middle class culture into question and argues that the community cultural wealth of people of color should be recognized as strengths in the forms of linguistic, familial, aspirational, navigational, and resistant capital. Especially because of the depoliticized nature of non profit organizations that often do not have the capabilities to challenge and critique hegemonic structures, many immigrant-serving organizations ride the fine line between helping clients to adapt and erasing their culture.

The role that community-based organizations and its members play as cultural brokers is key to bridging the immigrant world with that of larger institutions. A cultural broker bridges the gap between mainstream culture and other cultures while providing "mechanisms for continuity from the student's ethnic culture to mainstream culture" (Gentemann and Whitehead, 1983, p. 119), and they can "[create] a safe space in which to decode and translate the culture of power… [serve] as a means to deploy personal and collective social capital to gain access to networks of targeted mainstream-dominant institutions; and [integrate] and [affirm] community cultural

values, resources and rights" (Lopez and Stack, 2001, p. 48; Lawson and Alameda-Lawson, 2012). Complicating and problematizing the role of cultural brokers, Latina/o immigrant culture is often seen as a border that cannot be crossed by the dominant culture because it is non-Eurocentric, and cultural brokers exist oftentimes more to acculturate the subordinate group to the culture of the dominant group (Giroux, 1992).

In a study of two Northeastern Latina/o community-based organizations, Jacobs (2013) refuses to adopt an assimilationist viewpoint of the role of CBOs, and, instead, represents Latina/o CBOs as places of "social and political resistance to the hegemonic global, national and international forces of immigrant marginalization and stratification" (p. 506). Emphasizing that adaptation is not a "unidirectional process of 'Americanisation,'" Cordero-Guzman also describes the dual pressure on CBOs to maintain the culture that immigrants may value from the countries or regions of origin while also helping them adapt to the environment of the United States (2005, p. 905).

Cordero-Guzman (2005) analyzes community-based organizations and their assistance with the immigration process, adaptation and incorporation of immigrants, representation for the immigrant community, and linking immigrant communities to their countries of origin. The two key growth periods of organizations serving immigrants include: the 1960s to 1970s following the civil rights movement and increased immigration from Asian, Latin American, and Caribbean countries, and in the late 1980s (Cordero-Guzman, 2005; Cortes et al., 1999; Jacobs, 2013; Massey et al., 1987). CBOs often bridge language gaps and knowledge about social services and provide cultural sensitivity, awareness of the most appropriate method to deliver services, and recognition of groups' particular needs (Cordero-Guzman, 2005; Padilla, 1997). They typically aim to provide parents with an understanding of how to "'navigate' the intricacies

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of school system in the United States" (as well as other government bureaucracies and programs) and to help their children do well in school by getting the "adequate mix and level of in-school and after-school support" (Cordero-Guzman, 2005, p. 904). However, with the privatization and devolution beginning in the 1980s, communities without access to these CBOs do not have access to these services.

With privatization of the 1980s, the roles of government began to be handed to the private sector in efforts to shrink the size of the federal government—a process also known as devolution (Marwell, 2004). Accordingly, nonprofit organizations have exploded in the role they play as service providers—oftentimes, acting in an intermediary role between the state and the individual (Conlan, 1998; Eliasoph, 2013; Jacobs, 2013; Marwell, 2004; Salamon, 1995). The entire entity of nonprofits, according to Nina Eliasoph (2013), is reflective of the neo-liberal age in which the market is allowed to run society with the assumption that everyone's need will eventually be met and those that are not were unworthy organizations and individuals in the first place. With this decline of the state and the simultaneous entrenchment of neoliberal policies, the lives of low-income and working-class immigrants are more precarious within an unfamiliar system that does little to support them.

As most nonprofits are dependent on volunteers and government funding, Marwell (2004) and Eliasoph (2011) describe the various, sometimes conflicting, roles that nonprofits play. Most nonprofit roles can fit within one or more of these three categories: service provision, community building, and electoral politics (Marwell, 2004). In addition to translating direct services from the state to individuals, nonprofits often compete for government funding—which can result in a nonprofit's entrance into electoral politics to access those who can support their funding (Cordero-Guzman, 2005; DeHoog, 1984; Marwell, 2004). Eliasoph deconstructs the

ways that "since time is short, fundraising is almost constant, success has to come fast, and documenting and publicizing every success has to be nearly constant" (2011; p. x). Oftentimes, this continual need for funding, which is often provided through government grants and/or private donations, is what drives the structure of nonprofit programs.

Nonprofits are also reliant on volunteerism—a phenomenon that Eliasoph analyzes (2012; 2013). Her recommendations for helpful volunteers include either short-term, plug-in volunteers who do not try to make intimate bonds with the clients of the nonprofit, or long-term volunteers who can dedicate themselves to deeper relationships. This, however, may not be as appealing for the many volunteers who desire brief, inspirational encounters. In delineating the complexities and problematics of nonprofits, Eliasoph asserts how important it is for volunteers and nonprofits to also be active political participants, so they do not simply continue to perpetuate the systems that they are trying to counteract. However, because of the need for funding and the neo-liberal individualistic models under which nonprofits operate, many nonprofits do not engage in dialogue that actively deconstructs the dynamics of difference and power. The "good work" of nonprofits are complicated by the neo-liberal structures in which they operate, their need for funding, and their need to create exciting experiences for volunteers.

As they are simultaneously molded by specific needs of Latina/o immigrant populations and the contradictions that come with being a nonprofit, Latina/o community-based organizations function as a place for Latina/o immigrant communities to receive services but also to become active participants in within civic life and in a community that is supportive of their own needs. In negotiating the boundaries of private and public lives within CBOs, members create ties and spaces that can become a supportive community and network for them.

Research Methods

Building Bridges is a nonprofit that serves primarily first-generation, low-income Mexican immigrants living in the Inland Empire in Southern California. Its central office building is located in an upper-middle class, predominantly white suburb that is near an elite group of private colleges. Building Bridges was founded about fourteen years before this study was conducted, and its stated mission is to "break the intergenerational cycle of poverty and to work for the restoration of our planet… by helping underprivileged children succeed in school and go to college, by supporting young doctors who are bringing health and wellness into underserved communities, and through a variety of environmental initiatives." The only prerequisite for families to join the organization is showing their tax forms to prove that they are indeed "low-income."

The mission of the organization manifests in three main programs: the College Success program, their environmental initiatives, and their medical school scholarships. The College Success program includes many components: a mentorship program in which adults (mainly college students) mentor a younger student; a college prep program in which students in each grade level meet with staff to make sure that they are on track to go to college; SAT prep workshops; tutoring help; writing and music mentoring programs; parent workshops and a parent leaders group to help parents navigate the U.S. education system. Their environmental initiatives include the following programs: an ecologically sustainable building; a youth-led environmental social justice group; an urban farm program where families allow Building Bridges' farmers to plant vegetables in their yards and half of the vegetables are given to families while the rest are sold with the proceeds going to Building Bridges. The medical school scholarships are for relieving the debt of medical students who want to work in low-income communities. Because of

the variety of their programs, this office is just a central location—their programs operate in the nearby colleges, churches that open up their spaces, families who open up their yards to the urban farm program, and whatever place that mentors choose to take their students.

Knowing that it would be beneficial for my own role as the coordinator for the writing workshops with Building Bridges, I chose to study Building Bridges in order to get to know the organization and the people that are such a significant part of my students' lives. It was easy for me to obtain permission to conduct my research because many of the staff already knew that I coordinated the writing workshop. I visited the site at least once a week for ten weeks to help clean the vegetables for the urban farm program on Friday mornings when the farmers would drop off vegetables at the Building Bridges office, and I attended various events, such as the Halloween party, parent meetings, student meetings, and the posada party. I interacted mostly with the parent-leaders, who plan events for the parents in Building Bridges and the staff that work in the office building. Because many of their programs are run off-site, I was not able to observe very many of the programs in which students engage. My interviews were about one and a half hours each, and my sample consisted of Daniel Castillo (Director of Educational Programming), Evelyn Constancio (Receptionist), Michelle Reinman (Program Coordinator), Adrian Giraldo (high school senior), Maria Gonzalez (parent leader), and Lily Saucedo (parent leader).

The Building Bridges office is located on the southern end of the property of a Methodist church, which is obscured by two large bank buildings and their large parking lots. On the east side of Building Bridges is a theology school, and on the west and north sides are residential areas. The office is made with earth and is ecologically sustainable in many ways in order to leave a light carbon footprint on the environment. Dirt, brush, and cacti surround the office, and

at the end of the office facing the church, there is a pathway. On the side of this pathway is a wooden table with a mesh top for washing vegetables. Behind this table is the refrigerator that the parent volunteers built for the vegetables.

On the other side is an earthen sign that reads, "Building Bridges." There is a circular sitting area right in front of the glass door entrance. Made of earth, it looks like it was erected out of the ground below it. There are small tiles embedded on the sitting structure. On the glass doors is a poster with a picture of students in front of the Whole Earth building. Inside, the windows and a skylight illuminate the paintings, murals, and tiles that are showcased on the thick, mocha-brown walls. The receptionist's desk is on the right, and in this lobby area there are seats that jut out naturally from the sides of the building with pillows all around. On the left side of the building is their storage closets and restrooms. Glass doors on the right lead to the main office space. Inside this main office space is printers, copy machines, computers, desks, a door to the kitchen. Further into this office space are the individual offices of the administrators of Building Bridges.

Data Analysis

The data analysis argues that the process by which Latina/o parents participate in Building Bridges creates community along the dimensions of trust that is built, needs that are met, environments that are made sensitive to specific experiences, and emotional connections that are developed amongst members (Chavis, 1990; Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The process of participation that I describe will elucidate how first-generation Mexican immigrants enter Building Bridges, receive services, and create cultural spaces within the organization. This process of community formation, however, is not a perfect process because of the ways in which there is little room for critical thought about larger systems

of power and the dynamics of culture and difference (Eliasoph, 2011; Yosso, 2005). For many of the core participants in the community at Building Bridges, however, how they develop their grateful perceptions of the organization are key. Throughout my data analysis, I weave together criticism of Building Bridges' programs while elucidating how most parents still develop their immense trust in this organization because of the sense of community they develop there that can not be created elsewhere.

Entering the Program, Building Trust

Similar to the way in which parents recruited other parents into the parent-engagement program that Lawson and Alameda-Lawson (2012) studied, many of the families enter the Building Bridges program when they hear about it through established social networks—from their neighbors, relatives, educators or other people they already trust. Additionally, Building Bridges have pictures on their Facebook page of parents speaking to other parents at elementary and middle schools about Building Bridges' College Success program. These preexisting relationships also reflect the strong relationships that Building Bridges has with the families already in their program. Two of the parent leaders that I interviewed, Maria Gonzalez and Lily Saucedo, as well as two students, Adrian Giraldo, a high school senior, and Sara Rodriguez, a high school freshman, all heard about Building Bridges from people they knew—friends and relatives. The receptionist, Evelyn Constancio, describes this phenomenon:

> EC: Sometimes, I do ask, you know, how do you hear from us? [The parents say,] "Oh because of my neighbor or because I happened to talk to this person and you know, she told me about the program"… we have a lot of families that are related, either cousins or brother in laws, sister in laws, or just neighbors, or friends from school where the kids go.

As an indicator of homophilous patterns, trust is built when potential participants see other Spanish-speaking parents speaking so highly of their programs (McPherson et al., 2001). This

provides basis for the first layer of trust between Building Bridges and parents that is crucial to

the beginning of community formation (Lewis and Forman, 2002).

Not only do potential participants see aspects of themselves in the parents that recruit

them, but homophily also occurs when parents initially encounter in the staff is also instrumental

to the trust they develop for the organization (McPherson et al., 2001). Elizabeth Constancio, a

sweet, youthful-looking, middle-aged Latina, is the first person with whom people interact when

they walk into the Building Bridges building and the first person people hear when they call.

Likewise, Daniel Castillo, a portly, gregarious, middle-aged Latino, who is the Director of

Educational Programming (and one of the two Latina/os on staff), describes himself as the "face

of the organization," as he is the one who goes into the schools and people's homes to recruit

families into the program. They both speak Spanish and are Mexican immigrants, and their initial

contact with potential participants establishes a certain level of trust with the families who first

hear about the program. Indicating the significance of this trust, Maria Gonzalez, who "was a

little afraid" about allowing her son to spend time alone with a mentor, felt reassured after

talking to Daniel, who told her, "No, it's very safe."

The initial layers of trust, however, is often not enough for some parents such as Maria

Gonzalez and Lily Saucedo to trust their children with strangers, and a second layer of trust is

developed through "good communication" and perceptions of a "good influence"—coded words

that were repeated in many of my interviews. For Lily Saucedo, who is a generous and sweet

middle-aged Latina, with short curly black hair and always wearing a pair of parakeet earrings, it

was her daughter's elementary school teacher who started to change her uncertainty about

Building Bridges, and she noted that the "good communication" her son's first mentor had with

her and her husband was very important for her trusting the organization. An expressive, middle-

aged Latina and mother of three, who always wore glasses and pulled her long black hair back with a beaded clip, Maria Gonzalez described a similar sentiment, as she felt scared about the program, but Daniel, as well as, Carl, her son's first mentor, caused her to trust Building Bridges. Maria described Carl as someone who, " respect our culture, eat at home… And he trust us too. And we feel the same with him. Uh-huh. He talk with my husband too when he was at home." Both parents use the term "good communication" to describe what they valued about their experience with their children's mentors, and it was often a coded word for mentors who are willing to engage with the culture and lives of the families as well as being open with parents to reassure them that their children would be safe with them.

People who are excluded by the homophily of first-generation Mexican immigrants in Building Bridges, include low-income communities that are not first-generation immigrants, not from Mexico, or not Latina/os. The parents of Sarah Rodriguez, a high school freshman with tight, curly hair, and braces, are an example of this. Although this correlation was never explicitly stated, both of her parents are not involved at Building Bridges, and her white, originally-Floridian father is someone who may have been socially distance from the other groups. When I asked Daniel about the demographics of the families of Building Bridges, he said that there was only ever one black family—but all the rest were Mexican, with a few Guatemalan families, too. Although the trust that is built on homophily is limited and exclusive for Mexican immigrants, Mexican immigrants are racialized and stigmatized in other ways that exclude them out of many other communities, making this space at Building Bridges an important space of homophily that they might not otherwise have.

The Services Provided, "Needs" Met

Most of the "services" provided by Building Bridges involve providing ways to meet the perceived needs of the participants—a key factor in building community (Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012). While Building Bridges is mainly focused on education, there are many other latent functions of the program that assist parents, despite all the weaknesses I outline here. As a process of transferring economic and material capital to vulnerable populations, the urban farm program meets some of the health and food needs of families, and the staff often connect the families with outside services and organizations that can assist them with housing, immigration laws, mental health, and counseling. The main need that Building Bridges focuses on, however, is College Success, which seeks to provide access for low-income students to go to college and eventually get jobs that will "lift"[1] the community out of poverty. The mentor program and the college prep program serve to transfer social and cultural capital to the families for whom college becomes an expectation. Although there are many issues with the way these programs invalidate the cultural wealth of communities of color, many of the parents still demonstrate gratefulness for these programs and for Building Bridges (Yosso, 2005), and this provides the basis for the desire to form community within the boundaries of the organization.

The mentor program connects adults from nearby colleges and from the surrounding upper-middle class suburbs with the students in Building Bridges' programs. Building Bridges' way of matching mentors with mentees is a long process of applications and interviews designed to ensure that mentors are serious about their commitment because of how the relationships affect many of the mentees. Building Bridges is clear in distinguishing between long-term, intimately invested mentors and short-term volunteer tutors, and draw the important rules that

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[1] This is the language that, Michelle Reinman, a white staff member, employs.

Eliasoph (2011) outlines for volunteers to even out expectations with the mentees. Michelle Reinman, a middle-aged, fashionably-dressed white woman who is the Program Coordinator who deals most closely with mentors, describes mentors' roles as "helping kids stay in school… [and] as a friend and a role model and an advocate--just supporting that student. They're not a parent, they're not a teacher… mostly they're just hanging out and having fun." This program acts as a transfer of social capital by developing social networks for the mentee; it acts as a transfer of cultural capital by exposing mentees to privileged forms of knowledge (Yosso, 2005). Embodying white, upper-middle class characteristics, mentors and mentees go rock climbing, hiking, and camping together; mentees visit mentors in college, sleep in dorms, bake, watch movies, and do other fun activities together. Many of the parents and students say, however, that this is not a one-way process, and mentors will often spend time in their mentees' homes and with their families. Lily Saucedo told me how her son's mentors would make guacamole and celebrate birthdays with her family, and there is evidence of mentors stepping into Mexican immigrant culture. However, the coded privileging of white, upper-middle class forms of knowledge is still heavily promoted in the success language of a "good role model" who will "help kids stay in school."

Parents also develop trust, as they perceive that mentors will be a good influence on their kids. Adrian Giraldo describes how his mother, who had no qualms about Building Bridges, "really liked his personality and thought he'd be a really good influence on me." Oftentimes a "good influence" is a coded term for individuals who have achieved upper-middle class attributes in their polite mannerisms or educational and economic status. Maria Gonzalez said that Carl was a "good persons and don't have any crime or something like that. But and then I like too much. And then I know Cameron… was like an angel because… very polite, very calm

with Robert [her son], very patient, and I say, 'Oh, it's wonderful.'" Even if many mentees have powerful and touching relationships with their mentors, this privileging is a product of hegemonic power structures, but Building Bridges does no work to deconstruct and criticize these forms of knowledge—rather, they promote and inculcate it in their programming.

Relationships between mentors and mentees develop across a huge spectrum. Some mentees show strong affection for their mentors, and Adrian Giraldo is an example of an extremely enthusiastic mentee:

> AG: As we saw each other more often I just realized how great a person he was, and how much he could actually—like his knowledge of the world, and his experiences and all that. And I just felt so special to have a person like that in my life. Because without him, I don't think I would be the same person I am now.

Daniel, Martha, and Lily all describe that many of the younger kids are envious of their older siblings who do fun things with their mentors. Some students, like Lily's daughter and like Sarah Rodriguez, however, are more ambivalent towards their mentors; they enjoy spending time with the mentors but do not establish deep connections or attachments, oftentimes, do to the busyness of mentors.

The mentor program, however, hugely disappoints some students. Although Michelle Reinman says that they try to prevent this by evening out the expectations from mentors and mentees about the time frame of their relationship, it does not always work. The most poignant example is with Lily Saucedo's son, Ernesto, who was hurt deeply by the departure of his first mentor with whom he had developed a tightly knit friendship and then by the irresponsibility of his last mentor, who never attempted to talk to the Saucedo family and who ditched Ernesto when he visited him in college.[2] With tears in her eyes, Lily relates how Ernesto told her that although he was grateful for his mentors,

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[2] Daniel, upon hearing this from Ernesto, kicked the mentor out of the program.

he never wanted to go through something like that again. For some students, the

departure of their mentors, who graduate from college and move away, is painful, and for

some, departure is marked with much less pain because mentors may visit them every

once in a while and keep in touch from a long-distance via technology. Despite Lily's

extremely negative experience, she still has enough faith in the mentor experience that

her younger daughter has a mentor now, and Lily is extremely active as a parent-leader.

The transfer of social and cultural capital that is heavily involved in the mentoring

process is also welded into the other family programs that Building Bridges coordinates

(Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2011). At a parenting workshop in

Spanish on how to raise children in the United States, Daniel imparts the values of gratitude,

honesty, mercy, justice, integrity, independence, loyalty, optimism, patience, perseverance,

respect, and responsibility. He instructs them to start saving up for college and discusses

different methods of discipline. Another parent workshop that I attended addresses marriage and

how couples can navigate their busy lives while maintaining their relationship, which, according

to Daniel and the two or three people we surveyed, was very helpful for many of the parents—

two of whom came to tell him that they signed up immediately after the session for couple's

therapy sessions. Conducting the meeting as they did in Spanish promotes the linguistic capital

of this Latina/o community, and Daniel told me in an interview about how he tries to lead parent

seminars collaboratively with "conversation and experience-learning, so you tell me what you

learned from your son's experience with drugs, with sex, with relationships, you know? Tell me

what you learned about your husband, whatever. So that's how we try to teach the parent

seminars… with parents teaching parents." Although these workshops have an implication of

"cultural deficit" in that they assume that parents in the program do not already know how to be

good parents (Yosso, 2005), many of the parents were heavily engaged in the process, laughing and shouting over each other during the meetings. In many ways, the parent-leaders program, the collaborative workshops, and the urban farm program, as well, utilize the cultural capital of the immigrant community and subtly resisting with "counter-hegemonic action and thinking" (Jacobs, 2013).

Although I criticize the mentor program and some of the parent workshops as being partially dismissive of the cultural capital of that the families already possess, what is key here is that all of the families whom I encountered and who are core members of the group, are extremely grateful for how these perceived needs are met, and these other issues do not deter from the process of community building that happens here.

Building Bridges' key task is in assisting families with navigating the U.S. education system (Cordero-Guzman, 2005). One student that I talked to at an SAT prep class said that her parents had no idea how to even start the college application process, and she tells me that Carlos reads *all* of the personal essays and helps students set personal deadlines before essays are due. Every single person I talked to explicitly named going to college as the main outcome of being a part of Building Bridges. Evelyn talks about her own children, "What I told my kids, you know, the only thing when we die, what we're gonna leave you guys is just your good education." As successful as Building Bridges is with their goal of college access for low-income students, this singular focus provides little acknowledgement of the dynamics of culture and difference that create the cycles of poverty and the struggles of Latina/o immigrants that Building Bridges attempts to alleviate (Eliasoph, 2011). Because of the depoliticized programming of the nonprofit organization that must perform in a certain way in order to access funding, there is also no outlet

for the frustrations that Daniel, Michelle, and many other members expressed in interviews toward the education system and how it affects the youth in Building Bridges.

Not all students and families, however, see college access as a need. Some students are excited about the opportunity to help their parents and succeed. Some students are more ambivalent. Maria's son, for example, is not entirely enthusiastic about going to college, and Carlos describes many parents who are reluctant to send their children to college because of the distance. It has become something that has been instilled through multiple parent and student workshops and by the macrostructural processes that favor skilled labor and a college degree. Although respondents reported stories of dissenting voices in this one-way path to college, it is important to note that every parent that I encountered was extremely excited in learning about how accessible college could be for their children—and this was the topic that parents regarded with the utmost gratitude for Building Bridges.

Cultural Broker—But For Whom?

Daniel Castillo, one of the two Latina/os on staff at Building Bridges, acts as a cultural broker between the kids and their parents, between parents and the U.S. education system, and between parents and the other staff. This is a role on which many families are reliant. "Acculturated in both the mainstream and the ethnic cultures" (Gentemann and Whitehead, 1983, p. 119), Daniel translates differences in both language and culture to the parents in the organization. Describing his role as a cultural broker between families and staff, he told me his "upper-middle class" co-workers have a difficult time connecting with families, making it a "barrier" when Daniel is not available to help. In keeping mentor accountable to Building Bridges' rules, Daniel acts as a cultural broker between the families and the mentors. As a Mexican immigrant who grew up in the United States but also understands the parents'

perspectives, he acknowledges his own role as a cultural broker between kids and parents, as he will "spend an hour here crying with mom and the mentee and trying to fix a misunderstanding, you know? Because of culture." Without him, much of Building Bridges falls apart. However, Daniel's role as a cultural broker holds implications for understanding whose culture is being accommodated (Giroux, 1992), when he says:

> DC: I have to make sure that we educate our parents in what it means to be in America and what it means to have American culture and values… I understand the frustration they [students] have when their parents don't ask for help or don't communicate with the teacher or don't understand the American, quote unquote, culture, and they constantly bring in the Latino or Mexican culture.

Because there is no dialogue on the dynamics of dominant and subordinated cultures, this form of adaptation facilitated by Building Bridges becomes one that privileges dominant cultures because that is the culture that holds the social and cultural capital that is most apparent for succeeding.

Emotional Connections

Meeting the perceived needs of the families is crucial for community formation because it creates a space in which parents feel safe and are motivated to forge emotional ties. Daniel and Evelyn are extremely understanding of and identify closely with many of the struggles that the families face, and Daniel describes how he is "the first contact in any type of psychological need they [parents] might have." Similarly, Evelyn's "heart breaks" with the parents and the students in the organization because she is also a first-generation immigrant raising her children in the United States and identifies with many of their struggles. Although Adrian and many other students report that they feel close to Daniel, they are not extremely close to the other students in the program, and the community of parents is most prominent. For parents, Building Bridges has become a much-needed community, because of the isolation they face outside of community-

based organizations (Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012). Daniel describes the importance of this community for parents, "Because we become their social interaction network--some of our parents don't even have friends outside Building Bridges." Because parents are so isolated in other places, they integrate their personal and public lives very strongly at Building Bridges—there is no where else for them to have a sense of safety in a public place (Nippert-Eng, 2010). Compared to the strong boundaries that many of the white staff draw between their private and public lives, for Daniel and Evelyn they are drawn into the integration of public and private lives in Building Bridges.

Many of the parents create emotional ties and begin to feel less isolated while working together with the urban farm project and in the parent activities (Cordero-Guzman, 2005; Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012; McMillan and Chavis, 1986). Both of these spaces engage the parents in integration and blurring of boundaries. Similarly, in parent-leader meeting, parents bond as they discuss *chisme*, which Adrian describes as "drama." Lily loves the *chisme* and the relationships she has forged in Building Bridges because it's "not just to be together and try to plan an event but to… be outside the office, and just relax. Talk, eat, enjoy our relationship or friendship." This movement of relationships and interactions out of the designated space of Building Bridges is key in the boundary-drawing in which parents engage.

Specific to Building Bridges' community is the role that immigration and the "psychological suitcase" that many immigrants carry (Deaux, 2006). When I helped sort vegetables, the other mothers there, who usually speak in Spanish with each other, told me that they just know each other the same way they know me—when they volunteer here, and volunteering here is almost like therapy. Evelyn shared that most of the parents grew up on farms and that helping with the urban farm project serves to bring back memories of what life was like

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in Mexico. Something as simple as sorting vegetables drags the private lives of many of the immigrants into a public space in which many people bond. In the reading clubs that Daniel runs, the parents read books that relate to their experiences and share every week about their thoughts. Maria and Lily both expressed gratitude for the opportunity to share about their experiences crossing the border in these spaces—it made them feel less alone. The integrative approach to boundary-making that Building Bridges encourages also serves to reveal the sameness in people's experiences—not only does homophily create community, but it also reduces a sense of isolation. Along with the urban farm program, the posada that the parents put together every year at Building Bridges serves to connect families to a shared Mexican cultural tradition. Both Lily and Evelyn told wistful, nostalgic stories about how they celebrated the posada in their hometowns. It is symbolic of welcoming strangers into your home and being generous together as a community.

Parents and students are generally very grateful for Building Bridges and respond with an eagerness to help out in whatever way they can. Lily, Maria, Adrian's mom, and many of the other women I met at Building Bridges insisted that they really wanted to give back to the organization by helping to clean the vegetables, raising money for the organization with the crafts. The eagerness of the parents I encountered revealed many of the meaningful and significant emotional ties that draw them into a much-needed community with each other in a space provided by Building Bridges and not offered elsewhere.

Conclusions

Despite the ways in which hegemonic power structures are imposed by Building Bridges onto the adaptation process for immigrants, a strong sense of community is still able to form. Parents enter into the space through their social networks; they recognize and begin to trust

Latina/o bodies and Spanish voices that understand them in a way that many other spaces do not. Families in precarious circumstances as low-wage, Mexican immigrants are provided services that focus on their needs in health and access to education, and they respond with an immense amount of gratitude despite some incidents in which the programs and services were dubiously useful. The central role of one cultural broker elucidated the ways in which there exist distinctly different groups and hierarchies of people within the organization. As thankful as many people are for the cultural broker's role in making the community at Building Bridges possible, it is important to note that often he is translating and directing others in a way that values the dominant group. As these processes secure the trust of parents in the organization, parents interact in spaces that help them develop close relationships over similar experiences with immigration and the "home" of Mexico. As parents develop strong emotional ties with each other and with the staff, they are given spaces to create forms of cultural expression that act to alleviate the isolation they initially find themselves in as immigrants. It is a combination of these intersecting processes of trust, gratitude, and emotional bonds that serve to create the distinctive community at Building Bridges.

My findings were definitely limited by time and a small sample size. I was unable to find or interview dissenting voices within the organization, and I did not have the time to interview more students, as well, to gain a better understanding of their perspective. Additional limitations include my inability to observe the spaces in which many of the programs occurred because of the distance (I only have access to a bike) or because it occurred in private spaces (mentor-mentee time).

The findings of this study agree with the study conducted by Lawson and Alameda-Lawson on parent engagement in Latina/o community organizations, and the results deepen the

understanding of how parents begin to engage in community. This study elucidates the ways that Eliasoph (2011; 2013) analyzed the politics of nonprofit work and adds to literature on the importance of communities enacting agency through nonprofit organizations who make space available for them, but many of the most significant implications to draw from this research are the larger systems in which this community is formed. Since this analytical perspective is not present within the explicit structure of Building Bridges, I want to emphasize the systems of oppression that create the conditions in which a place such as Building Bridges needs to be formed.

The community that forms for many of the low-income, Mexican immigrant parents in Building Bridges points to the macro-structural processes of immigration and displacement—the spread of neoliberal capitalism imposed by the United States on Mexico and many other Latin and Central American countries through the North American Free Trade Act. It has devastated the local ecology and economy in a way that has displaced many individuals and families across dangerous borders and into a dangerous country where they are scapegoated, racialized, and devalued. Because of the devolution and privatization of the government in the 1980s and the continual refusal to provide more substantial social welfare to the most vulnerable communities in the United States, immigrants often have no other choice than to turn to nonprofits for assistance—if they even exist near them. Further research on nonprofit work should detail ways that the most precarious populations continue to create spaces in which they can find a sense of belonging and, as many respondents put it, a sense of "I'm not alone."

Research Methodology Appendix

My positionality as an Asian American college student running a writing program through Building Bridges significantly influenced the data to which I had access. Most parents greeted me with gratitude and appreciation—and they were often thanking me after interviewing them because they said that they were touched that I wanted to hear about their lives. There were multiple times in which I cried during an interview with a respondent who was crying as well, and many of them deeply blessed me in sharing their wisdom and thoughts with me. Because of my limited Spanish, I did not have access to many other conversations and stories from individuals who only spoke Spanish, but I still enjoyed practicing my Spanish with people who were patient and kind with me. It also gave me a way to show my willingness to engage in the community at Building Bridges. Coming from a relatively privileged background, I tried to be as sensitive as possible to the stories people shared, and I was very careful to try to emphasize the agency and bonds that the parents at Building Bridges were able to create. Since I will continue to coordinate the writing program, I look forward to maintaining some of the bonds I was able to make through my research. My research has definitely impacted my views on nonprofits and community-based organization and the importance of political awareness in any space with which I engage.

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