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Undocumented Mexican Immigrants in Philadelphia: Migration, Assimilation, and Attitudes Toward Language Acquisition

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Disciplines
Anthropology
Undocumented Mexican Immigrants in Philadelphia: Migration, Assimilation, and Attitudes Toward Language Acquisition

Honors Thesis, Presented to the Anthropology Department
University of Pennsylvania
Adviser: Dr. Greg Urban

Rita Rodriguez
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Introduction:

The research for this thesis was motivated by my own experience as a first generation immigrant in the United States and by my passion for public service. There were several purposes for conducting this research. The first purpose was to explore the experiences of illegal immigrants from the moment they decided to migrate until the present. The second purpose of the research was to investigate immigrants' attitudes toward learning the English language, taking ESL (English as a Second Language) classes, and assimilating in a country where the majority of the people speak a different language than they themselves speak. The third purpose of the research was to contribute to the community that I researched by offering my services as an ESL tutor/teacher. Lastly, my plan was to compile the data from this research and determine what the social service needs are of the undocumented Mexican immigrant community from my study.

This paper is based on interviews, ethnographic observations, and a community service practicum carried out from February through May 2004 at a non-profit organization called “Mexicanos Juntos.” I decided to base the fieldwork for this project at this non-profit organization because it provides free services to illegal immigrants such
as ESL classes, social service referrals, and community empowerment activities, and I knew I could contribute to the organization as a volunteer. The formal interviews for this paper were carried out with eleven Mexican ESL students and the founder of Mexicanos Juntos. Informal interviews with other students and members of the community were also carried out. The ethnographic observations were primarily from the classes I observed for the first few weeks of my work at the organization.

Importance of Studying this Population:

Undocumented immigrants are people who come to this country without legal documentation or permission from the United States government. Over one half of the illegal immigrants who come into the United States each year are Mexican.¹ Mexican immigrants enter the country through a variety of modes; they come in vans, by foot, through rivers, desserts, over mountains and past the border patrol. However, many Mexican immigrants arrive to the United States legally with a temporary visa, and simply remain past their expiration date.² Mexican undocumented immigrants make up a significant number of the new immigrants that enter the United States every year, and they contribute greatly to the United States’ economy as agricultural workers, factory workers, construction workers, landscapers, housecleaners, and low-wage foodservice workers.

It is important to study this population because their presence in the United States has been a controversial issue for decades. Part of the controversy lies in the fact that they have been stereotyped as taking advantage of America’s economy while simultaneously

² Ibid. p73.
crowding our cities. These are misconceptions. Apart from working the lowest paid jobs, undocumented workers pay taxes. They usually cannot file for Earned Income Credit due to their undocumented status, so the government keeps their money. Additionally, undocumented immigrants cannot take advantage of government sponsored programs like AFDC and TANF. It is important to study this population in order to help dispel the myths associated with their presence in this country.

**Methodology and Data Collection:**

The first step in conducting my research was finding a non-profit organization that provides services to undocumented Mexican immigrants. I planned on studying the population of immigrants that utilized the organization’s services instead of randomly seeking out undocumented immigrants in Philadelphia on my own. The latter option would have been unfeasible since there is no geographic community of undocumented Mexican immigrants in the city. They live in many areas and neighborhoods of Philadelphia and finding them on my own would have been too time-consuming for this kind of project. Additionally, I had to keep in mind that undocumented persons were most likely going to be reluctant to opening up to a stranger. Basing my research at a familiar organization was beneficial for my research.

As mentioned earlier, part of the objective of the research was to give back to the community I studied in the form of volunteer work. Finding an organization was the most challenging component of the research. I contacted organizations in the city that provide services to the Mexican immigrant population, but they did not need any assistance. Other organizations needed volunteers to work as administrative assistants. The research
I sought out to complete required that I perform ethnographic fieldwork, and the position of an administrative assistant in a large, bureaucratic office meant I would not have direct access to the actual people the organization helps. I contacted the founder of "Juntos", Peter Bloom, who welcomed me to work with the organization. In addition to being enthusiastic about my research, he was very helpful in familiarizing me with the organization and the ESL students, and he was willing to have me volunteer there as an ESL instructor for the duration of my project. Most importantly, Juntos is an organization that provides a safe environment for the population it serves, and by being associated with it, I could present myself as a trustworthy researcher.

In order to become acquainted with the organization and its students, I observed and participated in Peter's classes for three weeks before I started teaching my own set of students. I informed the students that I was working with Juntos as part the research for my thesis and that I would need their help later in the process for interviews. The students were open to the idea of being interviewed for the project, but they did not always understand how the research was going to help them. I explained to them that one of the purposes of the project was to submit a copy of my work to Peter so that he could utilize it to help him with the formulation of projects to benefit their community. The main objectives of the research were, after all, to gain a sense of what their attitudes are toward issues of language acquisition, and to explore what they believe are the needs of the undocumented Mexican community.

After becoming acquainted with the organization and my future respondents, the next step was to seek volunteers for the interviews and arrange a time when my respondents could meet with me. I found that the best time for people to meet with me
was directly after class. As a result of their busy, often unpredictable schedules, many
students were not consistent attendees at the classes. Consequently, I found myself
scheduling interviews with respondents who never showed up to class again because they
had found a day job or respondents who went to class on the days when I did not go. This
was a frustrating part of the process that I learned to deal with by scheduling interviews
for the same day I requested them.

In general, the respondents who went to the classes in the morning worked in the
evening, so my only option was to interview them during the day. Juntos had a few empty
rooms that no one used after class was finished, so I held the interviews there, behind
closed doors. No one complained about the interview setting since no one else could
listen in on their responses. Overall, the setting was comfortable and familiar.

I originally intended on interviewing the students in their own homes, but after
learning that they lived in domestic groups with many other people and that their lives at
home were not private, I realized it would be difficult for them to answer personal
questions if they were interviewed in that setting. As a young woman, I did not feel
comfortable going to the homes of my male respondents since the majority of them lived
with only other adult males. This should not imply anything about the Mexican
community itself since I believe it is not proper for me to visit the home of any group of
unfamiliar men.

Overall, the male students were the most enthusiastic about being interviewed.
They worked at night, and they were free to meet with me during the day. The women
were much less accessible. The ones that worked at night had to return home to prepare
themselves before they left for work. The women that did not work usually had children
they needed to pick up from school directly after class finished each day. Others had
brought their children to class, and were eager to take them back home. The women also
spoke much less when responding to the interview questions. As it turned out, the
majority of my respondents were male. I carried out informal conversations with the
women I could not interview formally, and I was able to learn about them in that way.

I usually carried out informal conversations with students before and after class.
On some days I remained at Juntos for the computer literacy classes where I had the
chance to speak to people about topics unrelated to class. Other times, students asked me
for favors, often ones I could easily grant them like searching for information on the
internet about a topic of their choice. One day I was asked by Peter to drive a woman and
her child to the center of Philadelphia where Peter was going to accompany her to help
her resolve a problem. I was more than willing to drive her since the place she needed to
be driven to was not too far from where I lived. Other times, I felt I was becoming too
involved with my respondents' personal lives. A woman asked me to search for airplane
tickets for her to travel across the country to California, and she later asked me to
purchase the tickets for her with my credit card so that she would reimburse me later.
While I trusted that she would reimburse me, I felt she was drawing me too far into her
personal affairs. I understood, however, that she had no other way of purchasing the
ticket, and I felt honored that she would turn to me for help. This was an indication that
she trusted me. Nonetheless, I could not grant her the favor because I knew I would run
the risk of having others ask me for similar favors. I set a precedent which the students
respected.
The interviews were all conducted in a similar fashion. I had intended on tape-recording them in order for the narration to be clearer, but I discovered that my respondents were reluctant to having their voices recorded. They were all undocumented, and they feared their stories being made public. I respected and honored their decision to limit the data recording to written form. However, this made it difficult for me to write down their responses in their full form. I found myself stopping them in the midst of their responses so that I could finish writing what they had just said. Other times I accepted the fact that I could not write as quickly as they spoke, and I rephrased questions I had already asked them so that I could have another opportunity to write down their responses. After practicing with the first set of interviewees, I learned to use shorthand and the transcription process became easier.

Since the respondents were not fluent in English, I conducted the interviews in Spanish. While using Spanish brought familiarity to the setting, it presented an additional challenge for my note-taking. I found myself writing responses in Spanish and English, depending on what I could write the fastest at that particular moment. Had the interviews been conducted in English, I could have listened and written without having to translate as part of that process.

Before starting the interviews, I reintroduced myself to the respondents and I told them about my background as an immigrant. This often resulted in questions about my experiences and advice on how they should tackle certain problems. The younger respondents were curious about my language acquisition and my experience in American schools. Others were curious about the process by which I became legal, but since I immigrated with legal papers, I could not offer them any advice. Our shared experiences
as immigrants facilitated the interview process because I could often relate to my respondents' stories. If I could not relate to them directly, I would find a way my parents' experiences could relate to theirs.

The interviews generally lasted between one and two hours. A few interviews were carried out over several encounters because the respondents had much to say about their experiences. The material I collected was not always useful for my research, but I felt I should not prohibit the respondents from telling their full stories. The shortest interview lasted about 45 minutes. This was the interview with my youngest respondent.

The questions for the interview were divided into sections by theme. I asked questions about the respondents' lives in Mexico versus their lives here, about their migration and the reasons for migrating, their attitudes about learning the English language, and lastly about the needs of the undocumented Mexican population. While the majority of the respondents understood the phrasing of the questions with ease, others did not. I found myself rephrasing questions or eliminating them altogether if the respondents could not understand them. Some questions did not apply to certain respondents, especially the younger ones, but they tried to answer them nonetheless. In my original set of questions I had intended to ask about the problems the respondents have had while trying to move up the professional ladder. I quickly realized this kind of question would provoke feelings of hopelessness since undocumented immigrants are quite limited in the types of jobs they can attain in this country. The purpose of my research was not to draw attention to their inabilitys, but rather to give them a chance to express their own issues without my influence. Thus, I did away with that question.
The Subjects of the Study:

The subjects of the study are all undocumented Mexican immigrants who live in Philadelphia and who take ESL classes at Mexicanos Juntos. All of the respondents were from a Mexican province called Puebla which is located 70 miles southeast of Mexico City. Two of the respondents, although from Puebla, had lived in Mexico City for some years prior to migrating. Over one half of the respondents claimed an association with the Aztec indigenous population in Mexico. I was surprised at their ability to still speak in their native language, Nahuatl. They regretted and confessed to progressively losing their Nahuatl language ability to Spanish and blamed development and colonialism for the gradual elimination of indigenous languages and cultures.³

At the time of the interviews, the respondents’ length of residency in the United States varied by person, and ranged from one week to 10 years. Immigration to Philadelphia from Puebla is clearly not a new phenomenon since people have been traveling here for at least 10 years. The social network immigrants from Puebla have formed in Philadelphia over the years has a strong pull for new immigrants, and many settle in Philadelphia because a friend or a family member has brought them here or they have suggested the city as a place of settlement.

The difference in migration patterns and reasons for migrating between men and women is worth discussing. Of the women I spoke with formally and informally, none had migrated without a close family member or a husband. They have also never returned to Mexico since they left the first time. Men, on the other hand, have migrated alone or with friends and have returned to Mexico to pick up their wives or family, or to begin

³ Interview with Mario and Carlos
building a house and using the money they have earned, or simply to pay a visit to family and friends. The women I interviewed reported having migrated because their husbands left them with no other option. Silvia is a perfect case. Her husband migrated when he was a teenager and when he returned to Mexico, she became pregnant with his child. She claims she was left with no option but to migrate with him because otherwise she would have been left to care for their child alone with no guarantee that she would see her husband again.

The expected length of stay in the United States varied between those immigrants whose nuclear families also reside in this country and those whose entire families still live in Mexico. The informants who have already started their own nuclear family in this country, the women in particular, believe they will live here at least until their children grow up to become self-supporting adults. Most of the men, however, believe they will only live here for some years before they move back to Mexico and reunite with their families.

With the exception of Carlos, the reasons my male respondents gave for migrating to the United States were strictly economic. Some, like Isidor and Ismael, were not generating enough money in their jobs in Mexico to support their families and cover the costs of basic needs. Others like Guillermo and Oscar were subsisting, but they wanted their families to live more comfortably. Carlos confessed that his reasons for migrating were more complex than strictly economic reasons. Carlos felt the Mexican government was excessively corrupt and the people in power were racist against Mexicans of indigenous origin like himself. He felt trapped by the racism and inequalities in Mexico,
and he felt he could never truly succeed in a country like that. (Carlos’ story is printed in a later section of the paper.)

All of the respondents live in the South Philadelphia area, some only a few city blocks away from Juntos. Their modes of transportation to the classes varied. Some rode their bikes, others walked or took the train, and only one couple I spoke with drove a car. Apart from not being able to afford purchasing a car, the other reason my respondents gave for not owning one was the paperwork that would be involved in registering a car, obtaining a license, and insuring the car. Since they are undocumented, the process would be very difficult to complete.

The respondents all lived in shared apartments in “domestic groups”\(^4\). Domestic groups are households where more than two people live together but do not constitute a traditional family. At the time of the interviews, Maria, Lorenzo and Ismael, who all migrated together, lived in a 2-bedroom apartment with four other people (a total of seven adults). Although some members of their domestic group are cousins of some sort, no two persons are part of the same nuclear family. They are now living in a larger apartment and no longer have to sleep in the same room with members of the opposite sex.\(^5\) Two older male respondents, Guillermo and Isidor, currently live in apartments with other males and no females. It is more common for males to live with only other males than for females to do the same with other females. The women I interviewed lived in co-ed domestic groups usually with another family member, or in apartments with their nuclear families and members of their extended family. In all cases, everyone in the


\(^5\) Interview with Maria
domestic groups contributed to the needs of the household either in the form of monetary contributions or providing services such as childcare for those who were employed.\(^6\)

All of the respondents lived with their nuclear families or in grandparent headed households in Mexico. The two youngest respondents, Hugo and Maria, lived with their parents and other siblings and were not responsible for contributing much to the total household income. Now they live in domestic groups where they must do so. Oscar, Isidor, Ismael, and Guillermo are men who left behind their wives at the time of migration. While Isidor’s children are older and can work to help support their families, the other men’s children are still too young to do the same. Consequently, these men work to send money back to their families.

The respondents’ education levels before they left Mexico vary only as a result of the different ages at the time of migration. Isidor and an older woman I spoke with informally did not ever complete secondary school because they worked on the farm most of their lives. The other respondents were either about to complete secondary school, or completed it before migrating. Only Guillermo had obtained any formal training after high school. He received classes in food service in a specialized school in Mexico City.\(^7\) The fact that none of the respondents had acquired a higher level of education implied they were from lower class families. This was in fact the case. None of the respondents has pursued further education here in the United States. First, they need to work to support themselves economically. Second, they do not have the English language skills of a standard student. Lastly, their status as undocumented immigrants will make it impossible for them to register for college classes. As will be discussed in a

\(^6\) Interview with Maria
\(^7\) Interview with Guillermo
later section, their lack of formal university level education has negative implications in their everyday lives in this country and in Mexico.

The kinds of jobs the respondents held in Mexico were dictated by their geographic location (outside Mexico City or within it), their ethnic background (indigenous or not), and their level of education. None of the respondents could claim to be a professional in any field, nor did they hold high paying jobs. The majority of the working men worked in the foodservice industry as waiters or cooks in Puebla or in Mexico City. The rest worked on farms. The women also worked on farms. The respondents who were still in school before they migrated held jobs on the side like selling flowers or working on the farm for their families.  

Little variety is also seen in the types of jobs they have in Philadelphia. All eight of the men work in the foodservice industry, mainly as busboys and dishwashers in restaurants in the center of Philadelphia. Two men, Mario and Isidor, assist in food preparation, one in a fast-food restaurant and one in an upscale restaurant. All of the women I interviewed worked in manufacturing factories or at home caring for other people’s children. Two women I spoke with informally were also involved in the foodservice industry. One of them worked at a chain restaurant as a busgirl (but receiving the wage of a waitress, which is about half of the current minimum wage), and the other woman prepared tamales at home and sold them on the street without a permit. The kinds of jobs all the respondents have do not require much English language ability.

It is no coincidence that the respondents of this research held similar kinds of employment as one another. It is, after all, convenient for business owners to hire undocumented immigrants for those kinds of jobs. First, the kinds of jobs available for

8 Interview with Hugo and Carlos
undocumented immigrants usually keep them behind closed doors washing dishes or in front of assembly lines, and their employers usually do not fear being persecuted by the INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service) for hiring undocumented workers (although it has happened in the past). Second, as a result of their illegal status in this country, undocumented immigrants usually feel like they cannot complain about their jobs because they risk losing employment and not finding another place that will hire workers without formal paperwork. Lastly, as in the case of the woman who works as a busgirl and receives the lower salary of a tip-earning waitress, managers can find ways of cheating their undocumented workers of their appropriate salaries. In the end, they pay less money to the undocumented worker than they would to the legal resident with working papers. Employers justify their behavior by claiming that “without the jobs which they provide to aliens, the aliens would be unemployed and perhaps starving in Mexico.”

The informants described their living conditions here as being “better than their living conditions in Mexico” or “worse.” Some of the immigrants who have lived here for many years, and who have established themselves financially, agree that their living conditions in Philadelphia surpass their living conditions in Mexico, even though they may live here without their families and friends. Some of them worked very hard to bring food to the table and subsist. They feel they now have the luxury to save and to purchase items they could not have dreamed of purchasing in Mexico. Others feel their living conditions are worse here than in Mexico, especially the younger informants who

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10 Interview with Hugo
were once supported and cared for by their parents. They complain about having to live with too many adults and having to work hard to contribute to the household income in their domestic groups.

The term “living conditions” is not synonymous with “quality of life.” It is also not true that an individual’s living conditions dictate whether he or she is happy in a particular place. Guillermo, for example, did not have any complaints about his living conditions here, yet he is not happy living in the United States. Likewise, Lourdes prefers her living conditions in Mexico, but she feels she is happier in the United States. Contributing factors to people’s unhappiness living in the United States range from their inability to speak English, to their limited access to familiar foods, people, and traditions. Other reasons will be discussed later.

In many ways, the group of immigrants I studied is similar to other groups of Mexican immigrants. These immigrants come from a lower class background in Mexico, and they migrated generally for economic reasons. As is the case with other studies, the majority of the Mexicans in the community I worked with come from one particular town or region in Mexico and settled in Philadelphia because of the social network that drew them here. The purpose of this paper is to look at how this particular community has assimilated in Philadelphia and what their personal stories can tell us about the process of migration and assimilation. The next section is devoted to personal narratives from six respondents. These narratives will express the respondents’ attitudes and opinions about learning English, their feelings about becoming autonomous in a society where their existence is illegal, and their general story from their situation in Mexico prior to migrating to their situation today.
The Personal Stories of Six Informants:

Carlos:

Carlos is a young man in his 20’s who migrated four years ago from Puebla. Carlos’ story is quite different from the others’ stories because his reason for migrating was not based strictly on economic factors. In fact, Carlos left Mexico because he felt he was being treated unfairly by his own countrymen for being of a lower class, indigenous background.

“I decided to work in the city for some time to try to make money since I could not go to school there. I worked at a restaurant, and I was surprised at what I experienced. In my own country I was mistreated... I was treated like an unwanted immigrant in my own land. Mexicans oppress their own people. The white city people treated me like a slave. They never asked me politely to do anything for them. They yelled at me for no reason. I felt the injustice of my own country. What do you do with a monster like Mexico has created? It is a racist, unjust monster. I learned that in order to succeed, you need to be from a particular place, know the right people, be of the right color and descent. I worked only for 15 days, and then I returned to Puebla and continued working as a farmer on the corn fields. I preferred to go back to the fields than to stay in a place where people denigrate you.”

Carlos experienced the same kind of injustice when he tried to further his education and become a professional.

“I came here because Mexico pushed me away. The government and the society there do not welcome all people... it is a racist and corrupt country. It seems as if it is never going to change. The poverty and corruption there are too much. The people are looking for a better future, but the government only allows certain groups of people to succeed. I noticed this when I tried to attend university in the city. I am from a small town named Puebla. I went to the D.F. to take an exam at the national free college; I wanted to become a veterinarian. I was shocked. Not only was I given an academic exam, I was also given a test about my social life and socio-economic status. They asked questions about the life I held...what state was I from...what was my family’s socio-economic background...was I in poverty? They asked me what my parents did for a living...were they farmers? Peasants? Professionals? They even asked me what my house was made of...brick? Mud?”
Wood? Cement? Adobe? They asked where I bought my clothes...What I wore on a daily basis...What I ate in the morning before going to school...eggs? Beans? How did I travel? By bus? By car, burro, taxi? Or did I walk?...Corrupt people in the university want people's money after they graduate. The obviously pick the wealthier students... I realized this when I got my results back. Although I did well academically, they rejected me. I should have known better. I walked on campus and I felt inferior...everyone had nice clothes, cell phones...I was a small-town boy... I looked indigenous. I did not belong there.”

The frustration from the constant reminder that he could not succeed like the “rich white men” in Mexico was not the only reason he migrated. He had economic reasons, too.

“Apart from the issues I faced trying to become a professional, other factors also made me migrate. The land in Puebla was deteriorating...there was not enough good land to farm and subsist...I needed more capital, more money to invest in the lands, but I had none. I needed to come to the USA and try my luck. My options were to stay in Mexico as a farmer, or to migrate. I did not think it would happen soon, but I could not stand it anymore. I felt trapped...halted by my own country. I tried to stay and take advantage of the opportunities of my own country. Unlike other immigrants, I actually tried. I thought there was a future for me somewhere there.”

Deciding to finally leave Mexico was a tough decision nonetheless. He made the decision knowing he was making the biggest sacrifice of his life.

“In life we all have to make drastic decisions. I asked myself how I could improve my situation, and the answer was, go to the USA...everyone was doing it. My grandmother, who raised me, taught me that Mexicans work hard from they day we are born. If we want something, we must work hard for it. That is what I am doing here, even though it has been tough.

Like other immigrants, Carlos confesses his experience in this country has been challenging. He has faced numerous economic hardships, and has had to survive them on his own. He also feels he is constantly singled out and discriminated against for being a Mexican immigrant.

“My life was like a nightmare when I first moved here. It is still a nightmare, but at the beginning it was worse. White people look at you like you are an alien from another planet...I think, we are all here on earth, we are all humans...Why the discrimination? Being undocumented means I do not receive the same kinds of services that other people receive. One day I was seriously burned at my job...my
face was scarred...I went to the emergency room, and when the doctors asked me for my insurance card and my identification, I did not have any...they just told me to put a lotion on my face and sent me home...I know there was more they could have done...but I am illegal...my face is still scarred.”

When asked what he believes the social service needs of the Mexican community to be, Carlos responded:

“That’s an interesting question. I was very involved in the politics of my small town. I represented my community’s needs in the municipality; otherwise the heads of the municipality would control my people. If we wanted benefits, we had to speak out...I helped do that. The government is corrupt...I needed to speak up and get people to unite...they thought we were ignorant, but we were not...some people did not know how to read, but we knew what we needed. When I first came here, things were different. I did not think political issues had anything to do with me...but they do. Only I mattered to myself when I first came here, and that is how others think, too...for a long time...some people feel like this always. But things do not happen overnight here. We need to get together and make something happen...we need to have a system of support for our people here. When Mexicans come here they think they are here just to work. And many do that their whole lives without ever thinking about how much better their lives would be if they helped one another.”

Carlos claims the Mexican community should come together and make the entire community strong against injustices and inequalities. He believes the help can only come from within the community and admits Mexicans are “too prideful” to seek help from charity organizations or from AFDC/TANF.

“We are not like the Caribbeans...they come to this country, and if things do not go well for them, they get on Welfare...I see them at the grocery store, getting free food...I hear them talking in my job about being on Welfare and getting money from the government. Mexicans come here to work hard. We do not go on Welfare.”

Carlos currently works as a busboy in an Italian restaurant in the center of Philadelphia. He claims he is happy at his job, but he would like to someday be given the opportunity to move up the ladder and hold a more important position. He thinks having a strong grasp of the English language will aid him in his advancement. Still, he is aware that his
status as an illegal immigrant will prevent him from fulfilling some of his dreams. He is nonetheless grateful that he can actually work and earn money here.

"In this foreign country, you never feel autonomous as an undocumented immigrant...you're never in a position where you feel like you're in power...even if you work two jobs...you're still illegal, and you still do not have anything you can legally call your own. I am always dreaming, but at least there is some hope here...not like in Mexico. I do not have much family in Mexico anyway, so I plan on staying here...I know it will be hard for me. I hope I can be legal one day and enjoy what I work for."

Silvia:

Silvia is a 21-year-old woman from Puebla who migrated six years ago at the age of 15. She married a Mexican immigrant who had lived in the United States for some years, and after becoming pregnant with his child during one of his return trips to Mexico, she felt she needed to migrate with him. Silvia did not migrate willingly, and the decision process to leave her country was very short. After becoming pregnant, she felt trapped. If she stayed in Mexico she would have to care for her child on her own. If she migrated, she knew she was going to lead a harder life, but one where her child would grow up in a formal family setting. Her migration to the United States has cost her many years of her youth.

"I spent three years here without going anywhere at all. I stayed home taking care of my baby daughter and watching television in Spanish. My husband brought me here...I did not want to come to this country, but he insisted. He had already lived here for some time, and when he went back, I became pregnant...I had no choice but to come. I do not like any part of being here...I have become accustomed to living here because I have been here for six years, but I do not like it...I have family living in Washington D.C., but the cost of living is high there...and my husband has a job here...so I must stay...but in general, Mexico is better than this country. My brother [who lives in Washington, D.C.] wanted me to come to the US a long time ago when I was still in school. But I said 'no.' I knew their life here was boring. They never went out on weekends; they just stayed home or worked. I was too young to give up my youth like that, but I know others who have done that...people
like my husband. He came here when he was 14 years old, and he has been working since then.”

Silvia understands her life would be different and perhaps better if she had a well-paying job and if she was fluent in English.

“I was working for some time when I first arrived here, at a Mexican store. I was not paid well because I was basically helping out a family member of my brother’s...I knew I had to learn English in order to apply to other places for employment.”

Everyday she is reminded of the importance of knowing how to speak English.

“I stopped working to care for my daughter... she asks me to read to her from books she picks up at school, but I do not know how to read them to her. I decided to learn English so that I can help her with school and be a good mother to her. I do not want her to feel left out. I am better at English now, and when there is a word in the books that I do not understand, my daughter helps me and teaches me the word. She is only six years old.”

Silvia shared a similar sentiment to other respondents about learning the English language: knowing how to speak English will make their life more private. With English fluency, they no longer need to relay their personal information to a translator first and then to the person they actually wish to communicate with. The constant need for a translator also means they must always wait for one or find one on their own. Without the task of finding a translator, they can lead a more pragmatic, independent lifestyle.

“My life would be much better if I could speak English well... I would be able to go to the doctor, school, or anywhere really, without seeking help from a translator. Now I can sometimes go places alone, and it feels good to know that I can be independent like that. Before I had to drag my husband everywhere I went, and when he was busy, I could not go anywhere. English is necessary. I cannot get around without it. People think I am a child if I cannot speak to them in English. I see learning English as a task...not as a hobby. It is a difficult language and it is taken me a while to learn it.”

Although learning English has been an arduous process for her, she realizes the importance of it. She predicts she will remain in the United States for quite some time,
and she understands that she will need to speak English more as her daughter grows up and assimilates into "American Culture."

"I think I will be living here for most of my life. My daughter is in school here, she is doing well. I think we will stay and let her have the opportunity that we did not have. I want to have a house here, to have more kids, and to make sure my family does well. We will try to maintain most of our traditions, but I know it is going to be hard. My daughter already speaks English and watches TV in English. I think she is already becoming very 'American'."

Silvia believes her story is not unlike other Mexican women's' stories.

_I think a lot of Mexican women are doing what I am doing...they probably came here because their husbands came first, or their husbands told them to come. They do not have a choice, especially if they have children or if they are pregnant. Many of the women I know here have stories like I do. And now we have to stay here...caring for our children and making sure they have some of the things we did not have when we were growing up._

**Isidor:**

Isidor was the oldest of the respondents, approximately in his 40's or 50's at the time of the interview. He had immigrated to the United States from Mexico City eight months before the interview took place. Isidor, like Carlos, is an example of a double-migrant, a term used to describe individuals who migrated from their native towns to find work in Mexico City and later migrated from Mexico to find jobs in the United States. He migrated from Puebla and left his family behind to go live in Mexico City with his brothers and find work, and he has done the same in coming to this country. Isidor, like many others, migrated as a result of the lack of resources in his country.

_"There is poverty in Mexico because there is no money in that place. There are no jobs. Plus, people like me get paid less because we are from the small towns. There is racism there, especially in the city. I was very poor in Mexico. I lived with my brothers there...here I live with some friends. I plan on working here until I make money and go back home to start a new life and build a house. Why would I stay here and suffer? My life is in Mexico. I am here just to work. I know I would be struggling in Mexico right now if I had stayed. Here I can at least make dollars, though. But I am going back."_
Isidor complains about the challenges of assimilating. Since he is older, it is more difficult for him to learn a new language. He currently works more than one job and consequently does not have time to participate in the ESL classes as a full-time student. In fact, Isidor only attends classes once every week if he is given a day off from work. In addition to the trouble he has faced learning the English language, Isidor has not become accustomed the general environment in Philadelphia.

"I should not say I do not like living here, because...well...I am here already. But I do not like it, especially when it is cold and no one is outside. I like to work and make some money. When I came here, though, I had no job and it took a long time for me to find one. I do not speak English...I regret coming here. I do not understand anything at work. I work too much to take classes, so I only come once in a while."

Isidor understands the implications of not knowing English. He confessed he feels blind at work because he does not understand what is taking place around him. He knows he needs to learn the language in order to attain better employment.

"In my job I need English. I make burgers. My cousin works there, too. She is a cashier though. She can speak some English. When I first started working, I did not even know how to say 'lettuce' or 'tomato'...how can I make a burger if I do not know what I need to put on it? I was virtually blind...I had no idea what was going on around me. It was horrible. It still is."

Learning English for Isidor is not solely a means to economic ends. He feels he should learn English as part of his "pilgrimage" to this country. Others like Isidor have come to the United States to one day return to Mexico with more than just money. They wish to be able to demonstrate new knowledge and ideas and to teach others about their newly acquired world view. In this sense, migration is like a pilgrimage. Going to "el Norte" implies experiencing new cultures and learning new things.

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13 Interview with Peter.
"I want to bring something back to Mexico other than money. I would like to be able to express myself. I want to show people in the ranch where I grew up that I actually learned something here in the north...English. I want to show them that my time here was good...especially my kids...I want to show them the English that I have learned...I want to teach them some words here and there. I want to get to know everything here...the train, credit cards, computers even. I do not see any of these things in the town where I am from in Mexico. I want to leave here knowing about these things."

Isidor is a very curious man who wants to experience everything around him, but it is evident from his spirit and his physical appearance that he has worked very hard all his life and he is tired. He confessed in his interview that he sometimes regrets coming to the United States, but he feels he needs to keep going until he cannot go further:

My cousin always tells me I need to ‘echarle ganas’ (phrase for, “put my all into it.”)

Guillermo:

Guillermo was the head of his household before migrating from Puebla. He has lived in the United States for three years, and has never returned to Mexico to see the family that he left behind. He wishes to someday return to Mexico and become a successful business owner so that he can better support his wife and children. Guillermo is well aware of the sacrifices he has made in coming to this country.

“It is worth not seeing my family in exchange for what I can do here...emotionally it has been tough, but I send them money, and I know they appreciate that...it makes this worth the work and the sacrifice. You always need to sacrifice something for something else, if you really want it. I left my family, but now I can work and support them better. Nothing is easy. I am saving up money to go see my family soon...I have not seen them in over 3 years, but I plan on going back to Mexico and living there...becoming successful...some have done it, others have failed.”

When he lived in Puebla, Guillermo felt he could not succeed because he was of a lower class. He could not develop to his full potential because he had to constantly depend on
others for employment, and this is why he is working here: to make money and start his
own business back home.

"I felt comfortable at home with my friends and family, but I did not feel good at
work. No matter how much I worked, I could never succeed and move up. I am
from a small town (Puebla), and we are not liked in the city... we are not liked by
the businessmen who come to our own town... I have always had to work for
someone, always dependent on someone else. I am here to become independent. I
do not even want to imagine what my life would be like 5 years from now in
Mexico... I cannot save money there... there is no hope... I only worked to subsist. I
would not have a house now if I had not come to this country."

Guillermo has held steady employment in Philadelphia as a busboy in a restaurant. He
complains that he cannot attain a better position because he does not speak English. He
was a waiter in Mexico before migrating, and he wishes to become a waiter here. Without
fluency in English, it will be almost impossible for him to become a waiter at the mid-
scale restaurant where he works. This frustrates him, particularly because he believes he
is capable of handling the job well.

"I know how to be a good waiter... I was trained at the best food service school in
Mexico... I would be a waiter here if I had the language... I hate the language
barrier. I know I can do it though... The ESL classes have helped me a lot,
especially theoretically – it is harder to use English in everyday life. I try to speak
to the clients at the restaurant where I work, and I have noticed that now I can
actually speak to people, ask them if they would like more coffee or wine. I do not
just take orders from my supervisor."

Like others, Guillermo recognizes the importance of learning English, and he asserts that
learning to speak English is not a choice but a necessity for him. He believes that by
speaking English he will be able to complete his everyday activities with more
confidence. Guillermo complains that he is discriminated against and labeled “dumb” for
not knowing how to speak English, yet he does not let these misperceptions stop him
from pursuing his dreams. Contrary to what others believe, he knows he is fully capable.
"I need to learn English – it is NOT a choice. Without English, you are not complete… with English you can go anywhere and be independent. Americans do not understand that I am an ‘individual’ even though I do not speak English, though. They think I am dumb. What they do not want to understand is, there is a difference between being dumb and just not being able to get around on your own because of the language. I will learn English and I will be independent."

Guillermo has lived in a domestic group with other men from the moment he arrived in Philadelphia. His life here has been difficult, partly due to the emotional struggle of being away from his loved ones. When asked if he has sought help for his problems, he responded:

"Not really…people are working all the time, and there is no space to complain, no one to really talk to because everyone is busy. Everyone comes here to make it on their own. I did not expect anyone to help me except for my nephew who told me to come to Philadelphia. In general, the Mexican community is not united."

Guillermo has utilized the services offered at Juntos for over a year, and he has begun to learn that Mexican immigrants can seek help for their problems.

"When I first came here, I was not very aware of the issues that Mexican immigrants have in this country. But here at Juntos I see that people like Peter want to help us resolve certain problems… I now know that people do have problems… why else would this organization exist? The problems must be out there."

I asked Guillermo what he thought was the biggest problem Mexican immigrants were facing in his community. To this he answered:

"A problem within our community is people drink too much alcohol. A lot of people are unhappy with their lives, others are trying to be happy, but they are not. So they drink their problems away, they turn to alcohol. I think they need to get away from the alcohol, save some money, and succeed... do what they came here to do."

Part of the migration process is learning to deal with the emotions that result from the challenges of assimilation and the inability to see fast, positive results. Guillermo and others identified the alcohol problem in the Mexican community, but they also understood why some people turned to alcohol as a method of temporarily forgetting
about their problems. Alcoholism is not a new phenomenon in the United States.

Guillermo’s concern is that alcoholism arrests immigrants’ potential to succeed.

Mario:

Mario is a young man whose appearance suggests he has lived in this country all his life. He first set foot in Philadelphia when he was only sixteen years old, and has spent close to five years working tremendously hard to find a social niche in his new environment and to “fit in” to his surrounding culture.

“At the age of 18, I realized I needed to make friends and have a social life here. I was getting tired of just working and coming home to watch television. I felt a need to meet people... to get out. I have gotten to know a lot of people, not just Mexicans. I have lost the ‘fear’ because now I know English.

Although he has met numerous obstacles, Mario has not let anything stop him from pursuing his dreams.

“I knew Center City only through my window. I had so many fears of going there alone because I did not know English... how could I ask for help if I got lost? I have managed... I have learned that immigrants as people should not limit ourselves. When I first came here, I thought, ‘What will I do with the people and the language? Will I spend a long time without talking to anyone? How will I get around?’ When I first came, I lived on Jackson Street and I knew only one route — from home to work and back.”

Mario lived with his mother in Mexico City after having migrated there from Puebla. He migrated to the United States because he felt his academic record would prevent him from becoming a professional, and he needed to find a way to earn money and help his mother. He has held a number of jobs in the food service industry, and currently works as a cooking assistant. He claims he was offered the position of cooking assistant once he could speak sufficient English to handle the requirements of the job, and he is convinced he will continue to be offered better positions as his language skills improve. Unlike most
other respondents in this study, Mario learned English because he “liked it” and because he needed it for communication purposes. Mario and Hugo had already been exposed to English in introductory classes in secondary school, and they had developed an interest in the language prior to their migration.

"I decided to learn English... first of all, because I liked it, even though it is difficult for me to learn... most importantly, because I need it to communicate. At first I thought, 'Will I lose my Spanish?' It was a hard decision... but I needed it. I could not understand anything at work... so our communication was based on signs... I could do my work because it was simple... but no socializing... I did not speak any English. English has definitely helped me feel more independent here... my life is now more private. I do not need people to accompany me to the doctor's appointments as translators... my business is now public to anyone anymore. I also do not have to waste time waiting for an interpreter when I go places like the doctor's... I feel more free."

Mario adds:

The language has helped me change jobs. Before I was a bus-boy at the restaurant... now I am a cooking assistant. I need to know recipes now, and I need to be able to read ingredients and labels and call foods by their names. I sometimes have felt uncomfortable with my Mexican coworkers because I have told them we need to try to speak only in English at work, especially when our American coworkers and supervisors are there. One, because we need practice, two, because I do not want to make the Americans feel uncomfortable... like we are talking about them behind their backs in Spanish. I owe them my job... I think we should be more American in that sense.”

It was obvious to me from our interview that Mario feels a sense of American pride which is very different from the other respondents. Rather than feeling like this country is a steppingstone for future successes in Mexico, Mario feels he belongs here now. He feels indebted to this country and to his supervisors at the restaurant for allowing him to progress. He has a general positive outlook on life and on what this country can offer him as an immigrant. When comparing Mexico to the United States, Mario states:
“Apart from the language, the other major difference between here and Mexico is the socialization of the people. I’ve noticed in this country that people of all races and socio-economic backgrounds mingle together...they do the same kinds of things, too. You can walk on the street with anyone; eat at a restaurant with anyone...no matter what color he is, or what he is wearing. In Mexico it is completely different – the separation between classes and ethnic backgrounds is much more pronounced. There is racism there, different than here I think.”

Some would argue that Mario’s perception of the United States is somewhat naïve, but a person who has never lived in Mexico and has never been discriminated against for being of indigenous background cannot claim for sure that Mario’s perspective is too idealistic. Mexicans of indigenous descent, as told by respondents like Carlos, can never truly succeed in Mexico. They are seen as backward and they are marginalized for being from small towns and for not having the “Westernized” appearance of city dwellers. For some, living in the United States is in fact better than living in Mexico’s segregated social environment. Others like Hugo do not agree.

**Hugo:**

Hugo is a young man who migrated one year ago at the age of sixteen. Although he is still very young, Hugo must live in domestic group and contribute to the household expenses like the other adults. Hugo lived with his family in Puebla, and migrated because his brother convinced him that he could make more money here than in Mexico. He left school to try his luck in the United States, and he now wishes he was still in school in Mexico.

“I came here and left high school. I could not finish school there, and I cannot finish here either. I need to work. My parents are not here with me like in Mexico. I am alone, and I need to make money for myself. Plus, I do not speak English... How could I go to school here anyway?”
Like Mario, Hugo’s youth and his exposure to English in secondary school influence his attitude toward learning the English language.

“I want to learn English because it is a cool language... and because it is necessary. I’ve always wanted to learn it, even when I was in school in Mexico. My school offered the classes, but I only learned a few words before I left school to come here.”

Hugo’s inability to speak English has been the cause of his discontent at work.

“Here I get yelled at in my job...I work making pizzas, and if I do something wrong, the supervisors yell at me. I think I will do better there if I knew English. I do not even know why they yell at me most of the time. Other times I know I did something differently than they told me to... but it is because I do not know what they’re saying in English when they tell me what to do.”

He has not adapted well to the changes he has experienced living in this country, and he complains about the differences in culture that exist between Mexico and the United States.

“Here the culture is different. Neighbors call the police on you because they think your music is too loud... even if it is not. The music bothers them. In Mexico we can turn it up as loud as we please... everyone lives nearby and everyone knows you.”

Hugo is young and wants to lead a life like he did in Mexico when was going to school and living at home. In Mexico he felt free to act like a young man, whereas here he is bound by his financial and social situation.

**On Theories of Migration:**

Scholars have offered numerous migration theories to explicate historical migration patterns. One such theory is the traditional “push/pull” model of migration. This theory proposes the “push” of diminishing opportunities and the “pull” of new ones
to explain the flow of migrants from one place to another. In other words, each location has characteristics that either repel or attract migrants. The characteristics are weighed against each other as in an equation, and the location with the most positive aspects compared to negative ones is the place to where people migrate. It follows that the location with the most negative aspects is the location from which people migrate.

The push/pull model can be applied to the situation of undocumented Mexican immigrants in Philadelphia. They have migrated from Puebla either as a result of economic hardship or as a result of political limitations on their personal development. While life in the United States has proven to be a struggle, the respondents feel the sacrifice is well worth it. The benefits of migration seem to outweigh the sacrifices of migration. In this section I will discuss the repelling and attractive characteristics of Puebla and Philadelphia, and how these characteristics encourage the flow of migration from Puebla. I will compare Puebla and Philadelphia by examining the respondent's lifestyles, their employment opportunities, and their language attitudes in each location. I will then introduce two new theories of migration that apply to the cases in this study.

**Lifestyle:**

Life in Mexico and the United States has not been easy for any of the respondents. The major difference in lifestyle between the two places lies primarily in the lack of familiarity with American culture. The second important difference for this particular group of immigrants is their undocumented status. As their stories have evidenced, the

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most challenging aspect of living in the United States has been adapting to the cultural changes and learning to live without legal papers.

The respondents all lived in different forms of poverty in Mexico. Some respondents lived in adobe homes and had been engaging in subsistence farming as their only source of income prior to migrating. Others lived in more permanent housing, held low-wage jobs, but could barely support their families. Lastly, some lived in low-income housing developments in the slums of Mexico City. Their socio-economic status and the resulting difficulty they were experiencing with earning a living was the major reason the respondents gave for migrating to the United States.

The respondents lived in small communities in Puebla and in the outskirts of Puebla. “Everyone in my neighborhood knew each other,” claims Guillermo. The community members shared the same traditions and customs, and some spoke a native language of the Aztecs, Nahuatl. Some, like Carlos, were very involved in the politics of his town, while others dedicated themselves primarily to farming, earning a living, and caring for their families. In all cases, no one had complaints about the social life in Mexico. Life in Mexico, however strenuous, offered the respondents opportunities to engage in fun activities with familiar people.

The respondents’ lifestyles in the United States differ significantly from their lifestyles in Mexico. In the United States, immigrants have to learn to live as foreigners for most, if not all, of their lives. For those who can appear like they have adapted, like Mario, living as a foreigner just implies not knowing how to speak English as well as natives and not having legal papers. Mario has tried to adopt aspects of American culture like shopping in the center of the city, becoming friends with natives, and dressing like
mainstream youth. For others, especially the newer immigrants, living as a foreigner implies always feeling different than the rest of the population and feeling “alienated” for their apparent differences in culture and socio-economic status.\textsuperscript{15} They find it difficult to embrace American traditions, and their solution is to remain isolated from mainstream culture until they feel the confidence to show themselves to the world.

Undocumented immigrants always feel restricted in their daily life. They are not allowed to make use of government services which are intended for legal residents or American citizens. College age students, for example, cannot apply for financial aid, and therefore they cannot pursue higher education. Undocumented immigrants cannot obtain the higher-wage jobs offered to educated, legal residents. This has implications for the kinds of lifestyles available to them. A person who never earns more than minimum wage cannot expect to live a carefree life. He works to pay for his bills and to save money to send back home where the dollar has relatively more value. He can expect to someday lead a better life in Mexico, but here he is limited to how wealthy he can become. If he wants to save, he needs to live in low-income neighborhoods and spend very little on himself.

Overall, the respondents’ lifestyles in the United States were similar by sex. The male respondents’ daily activities consist of working and returning home to rest before they have to leave for work again. They live in domestic groups, so they are also responsible for chores and cooking. In Mexico, their wives and mothers were responsible for the maintenance of the household, so some of the men have had to become accustomed to caring for themselves in this respect. Their weekends here are spent resting, working, preparing for the week ahead, or participating in social activities with

\textsuperscript{15} Interview with Beatriz
other Mexican immigrants. As was mentioned earlier, respondents complained about the alcohol problem that exists in the male immigrant population. It seems that men turn to alcohol when they are depressed or unhappy about their current situations.

The female respondents' daily activities also consisted of working and returning home to rest and to take care of household chores. Women who have young children usually stay home and care for their children while their husbands work. Affording day care for the children is often problematic and unfeasible, especially because the government subsidized programs are intended for legal residents only. Women and men alike referred to the television set as their major form of entertainment. Television programming in Spanish seemed to provide them with a familiar, accessible pastime. At Juntos we often encourage the students to watch television programs in English so that they can practice the language, but the students prefer watching programs in their own language. For some, the television is the only familiar part of their day, especially for the immigrants who do not speak English and who spend the day at work without understanding anything their coworkers say.

Overall, the respondents' lifestyle in the United States cannot be labeled as better than or worse than their lifestyle in Mexico. For some, their lifestyle here is a vast improvement, but for others, living in Mexico is better than living in domestic groups and having to work to support themselves. The situation varies by person. Whatever their case, the respondents prefer to deal with the changes in lifestyle in order to take advantage of the opportunity to work here and earn dollars.
Employment Opportunities:

A major reason for migrating for my respondents was the search for a better job and better earnings. Puebla did not have much to offer to those not formally educated and trained for professional jobs. Most of the jobs were centered on the farms. The other available low wage jobs were limited and very few could take advantage of the opportunities. Hugo, for example, made money on the side by taking small jobs as a delivery boy for a flower shop. He complained that the job was temporary. Others like Guillermo worked in restaurants owned by city business owners doing business in Puebla. He complained about the work environment, stating he was ill-treated by his supervisors for being of indigenous, low socio-economic background. Carlos had the same complaint about the jobs he held in Mexico City. In addition to being treated badly by his supervisors, the clients at the restaurant were racist and treated him like he was an “illegal immigrant in [his] own country.” 16

In the United States, undocumented immigrants can use falsified social security numbers to fill out job applications. The government deducts money from their paychecks just like it does to everyone else, yet very few undocumented immigrants receive any money back from the government for taxes or as part of the Earned Income Credit program. They essentially “pay” the government money every time they receive a paycheck. Americans have complained for decades about the way undocumented immigrants just use the country for jobs without contributing to the economy. This is a significant misconception. Undocumented immigrants contribute to the economy in the form of taxes, and they also accept the low-wage jobs that oftentimes American citizens prefer not to take, like washing dishes at a restaurant.

16 Interview with Carlos
The respondents I interviewed had all gotten their jobs through the same social network that drew them to Philadelphia. Family members and friends inform one another about available job opportunities. My respondents usually accepted jobs without actually knowing what they were going to be doing because they were grateful for any opportunity to make some money. Some respondents, like three students I taught recently, had acquired jobs less than a month after migrating. Others had been unemployed for over a year before they found employment. One woman who sells tamales on the street as her only source of income has not found a job in over two years. I discovered that the respondents with stronger social networks seemed to find jobs sooner.

The respondents were generally content with their jobs in the foodservice industry as dishwashers, busboys, and busgirls. They believed that with stronger language skills they might someday “move up” the employment ladder and become a waiter or waitress. This seemed to be their ultimate goal. I was not sure if they dreamed of becoming waiters because they were aware of their limits as undocumented immigrants or if they genuinely felt happy serving costumers. One respondent in particular was very passionate about becoming a waiter. He complained that the English language was preventing him from attaining the job he has always wanted to attain. Waiters make significant amounts of money in tips, depending on their skill and on the quality of the restaurant where they work. A waiter needs, in the least, to be able to communicate effectively with his customers. Unfortunately, without English fluency, he can expect to remain behind the restaurant’s oscillating doors.

The women seemed to me less concerned about attaining “better” jobs than the men. Only one woman I spoke with worked as a busgirl, and she was content with the
position. As I mentioned earlier, this woman was being paid the same wages as a tip-
earning waitress, which is almost half of the current minimum wage, or less than
$3.00/hour. Although busboys and busgirls receive some money in tips from the waiters,
this is seen mostly as a bonus, and not a requirement. This woman’s situation is an
example of the way undocumented workers are exploited in this country.

The subjects of my study were grateful for having the opportunity to work
because they did not have the same opportunities in Mexico. They were willing to
sacrifice their lives for the chance to make money. For better or worse, most of them do
not demand to be placed in positions that require formal education or training. This way,
they can remain content about their job situation since they have many other worries to
handle.

Language:

The issue of language and attitudes toward language acquisition is one which
highlights an interesting parallel between the immigrants’ experience in Mexico and the
United States. The gradual Westernization of Mexican provinces has had negative
implications for the indigenous populations. One major implication has been the
abandonment of indigenous languages in public schools with the introduction of a
Spanish curriculum. A number of the respondents in my study grew up speaking Nahuatl,
a language of the Aztecs, but they have lost their ability as a result of having to learn
Spanish in school. Speaking Spanish is a prerequisite for attaining jobs and for enrolling
in the national universities.
The respondents in my study demonstrated their concern over the abandonment of their indigenous traditions. They believe their culture should be preserved indefinitely because they believe Mexicans were indigenous before they were "Latinos." Learning Spanish has become a necessary part of Mexican culture, and indigenous populations must learn it in order to partake in the Mexican economy.

Carlos compared learning Spanish in Mexico to learning English in the United States:

"The difference is, my people learned Spanish because someone went and told them they had to change their ways or they would be left out of the 'new' Mexican culture. They were forced to learn a new language; otherwise they were going to lose out on opportunities. See, it is different here. I came to the United States by choice, and I choose to learn English. No one is forcing me to... No one makes me come to class. English is necessary for communication, it is true... That is how the situation is similar to learning Spanish in Mexico." 18

Carlos makes an important distinction: immigrants choose to migrate, and they often understand the implications of not speaking English. The difference is, indigenous groups in Mexico have been forced into learning Spanish by the government. People like Carlos and Mario fear that the recent generations of indigenous groups will grow up without knowledge of their roots and their original language:

"I think children need to retain their culture and traditions. We all have beautiful cultures, and we should not lose them... The language is a major component of culture, and children should retain their Nahuatl, or Spanish... life would be too simple without culture." 19

My respondents felt the same way about learning English. They agree that children and immigrants should retain their Spanish ability, or they risk losing their culture altogether.

17 Interview with Mario
18 Interview with Carlos
19 Interview with Mario
The younger respondents of my study who had been exposed to English in secondary schools have had an easier time learning the language than older adults. They confess that while learning English is a hard task, they have a true interest in the language. I was surprised to discover that learning English is also important for Mexicans who live in Mexico:

"English is necessary in all countries. You need to learn it to be able to communicate...like in Mexico. There are a lot of tourists that go there. If you want a job in the city, especially with tourist activities like working in a hotel, you have to know some English. It is good to be able to teach 'Gringos' about our own culture in English."  

All the respondents feel that learning English is a necessary component of succeeding in this country. While some enjoy learning the language, most see it as a frustrating task. For adults, learning a new language is not easy. In fact, learning English is one of the hardest aspects of living in this country for immigrants. My students would often sigh during class and confess how frustrated they felt for not learning the material as quickly as they wished. I constantly reminded them of their progress and told them that learning the language is hard for everyone. I also explained to them that Latinos are the largest minority in this country, and they should not feel that it is their sole responsibility to find a way to communicate with the majority. Still, they feel responsible when their inability to speak English gets them into trouble. A woman went to Juntos to seek help for an issue she had to deal with at her daughter's daycare center. A miscommunication resulted in her daughter's expulsion from the center, and the woman blamed herself for the error:

"It is my fault for not knowing English. They asked me for my work number, and I gave them the one I knew at the time. I could not call them and tell them I was [20 Interview with Lourdes]
changing jobs because I do not know English. They kicked my daughter out of the daycare program because when they tried to contact me at work, they were told I did not work there. They thought I was lying. But it is not their fault – I need to learn English. "21

For my respondents, the problem with learning English is the huge time commitment it involves. Most of them work full-time jobs, and they cannot make it to class everyday. Others work more than one job, and they only attend class on their days off, which happens very seldom. The students who are able to learn English the fastest are ones that attend class frequently and practice outside the classroom. Peter, the founder of Juntos, is well aware of his students’ inability to attend every class. He designs his classes expecting inconsistency in attendance. His organization, he says, helps the population that cannot commit to the formal classes offered elsewhere in the city. His curriculum is flexible for this reason.

For immigrants, learning English in the United States helps them feel more autonomous and self-sufficient. They can go about their daily activities knowing they can ask for help if they ever need it. Others can go to work and understand what is taking place around them. Also, once they speak English, they do not need the help of a third party for translation. Consequently, their lives are more private. My respondents shared stories of feeling like they were alienated for not speaking English. They felt that English-speaking Americans looked down upon them for their inability. Learning English for these respondents is a means of boosting their confidence and demonstrating their ability to others. It is an important step in becoming self-sufficient, and one that is worth the sacrifice in the end.

21 Informal Conversation
Other Possible Theories:

I have selected two additional migration models to help explicate my respondents’ migration processes. The first of these is called the “Social Capital Theory.”

“Social capital emanates from migrant networks. There are interpersonal ties that link migrants, former migrants, and potential migrants in origin and destination areas through the connections of kinship, friendship, and shared community origin. The existence of these ties is hypothesized to increase the likelihood of emigration by lowering the costs, raising the benefits, and mitigating the risks of international movement.”

The model suggests that the social capital of existing networks not only attracts newcomers, but also helps newcomers find employment and helps them attain economic success.

As is the case in Philadelphia, the social network that has been created by immigrants from Puebla has drawn new immigrants. The respondents of this study have thanked their social networks for the ease in obtaining employment. For those who have not been influenced by a social network, obtaining employment and making ends meet has been more difficult than for those who have been drawn by the network.

A second model I would like to look at is the “Cumulative Advantage and Cumulative Disadvantage Process.” This model takes into account political reasons for migration in addition the already discussed economic ones of the push/pull model. This model deals with migration processes as well as assimilation processes. (See diagram below.)

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23 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
In the case of low social class, undocumented Mexican migrants who were motivated to migrate because of the economic hardship in Mexico, the fact that the United States government has created unfavorable policy for undocumented immigrants means that the new immigrants will have a more difficult time assimilating than those of high social class who migrate for political reasons to a country that provides refuge for them. This is the case of the respondents from my study. They left Mexico for economic reasons, and they realized upon arriving here that undocumented immigrants have fewer rights than other types of immigrants. The fact that they were not well educated in Mexico and they were generally of low socio-economic background implies they will have a difficult time obtaining well-paying jobs and assimilating.
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Concluding Thoughts, Implications for Social Service:

One of the objectives of studying the undocumented Mexican population in Philadelphia was to collect information about their assimilation into this new culture and about their needs and challenges in that process. As we have already discussed, language acquisition is one of the most important challenges for immigrants, and organizations like Juntos are doing their best to accommodate even the least flexible students. The other important challenge the respondents reported is adapting to a new cultural setting while simultaneously earning a decent living. For the younger generations, assimilation is a smoother process. For the most part, they can learn English quicker and work to support themselves. For the older populations, however, making ends meet in the United States while still being able to send money back home is a significant challenge. Add to that the process of assimilation and feeling uncomfortable in this country, and we end up with often frustrated, exhausted individuals who really just want to return to their country with whatever money they have saved.

The process of assimilation could, of course, be facilitated by having strong social networks that help one adapt to the changes in lifestyle. The respondents in the study confessed that the Mexican community in this city is not united. If the community were united, community members could serve as resources for each other and especially for the often clueless newer immigrants. The social networks that are currently in place are only useful for drawing immigrants to Philadelphia from Puebla and for helping the new immigrants find jobs. The respondents gave four major reasons for the lack of unity among the community and the lack of a helpful social network.
The first reason is, immigrants internalize their emotions because they believe they are the only ones suffering from their problems. They have heard stories all their lives about the “successful” migrants who return to Puebla with money, stories, and plans, and they blame themselves if they cannot fulfill the dream. The second is, they work too much to find the time to speak to anyone about their problems if they ever decided to do so. If they are not working, their friends and family might be working and they cannot find anyone to talk to and seek advice from. The third reason is, Mexicans are not united in Philadelphia because they are not united in Mexico to begin with. Very few Mexican professionals in Philadelphia have actually turned around and given back to the communities from which they came. There is a limit to how much undocumented immigrants can help each other. They need the help of Mexicans who have “made it” and who can offer solid aid. Lastly, the respondents confessed that Mexican immigrants are sometimes too “prideful” to seek help, especially from government programs like AFDC/TANF. This last reason is of particular importance.

Organizations that would like to help undocumented Mexican immigrants must keep in mind that the population they are dealing with might not seek the help they offer. Peter attests to this and confesses that he usually has to convince his clients to accept help from his organization and other organizations. Clients seek Juntos for the ESL classes first, and later Peter informs them of the services the organization provides. The respondents who have taken classes at Juntos for a long time were well aware of the organization’s services. They claimed they often refer new immigrants to the organization if they need help with issues of documentation, childcare, and enrolling their children in schools. Still, Juntos represents a small number of the undocumented

26 Interview with Carlos
population in Philadelphia, and many people have never sought assistance in their process of assimilation.

Respondents like Carlos claim that even if he was legal, he would not seek help from government subsidized programs like AFDC/TANF because it demonstrates ones weakness and inability to work hard. Some Mexican immigrants are convinced they can make it on their own as long as they work hard for what they want. As the narratives revealed, the respondents have been taught that anything is possible if they “put their all into it.”

They are taught never to give up. Carlos and others look down on Caribbean immigrants who receive help from the government because they believe the Caribbean immigrants are taking advantage of the programs: “They are lazy. If I can work two jobs, they can work two jobs,” claims Oscar.

Perhaps pride is the reason Mexican immigrants do not seek help from government programs and the reason they look down on immigrants who do. Still, I believe there is another explanation. I believe that immigrants who are aid-recipients have a different notion of the “American Dream” than immigrants who believe that it is worth working two jobs and never having the time to do anything else. My respondents complained about never having time to socialize or to attend ESL classes because they were always working. Others complained about their housing situation, but agreed that living in domestic groups implied they could save more money to send home. Their version of the American Dream is one where working hard can lead to success. In this respect, their version of the Dream is not different from others’. However, the difference lies in what their goals are and how they define “success.” For my respondents, success means saving money and sending it home to their families or collecting it so that when

27 Interview with Isidor
they return home to Mexico they can use it to start their own businesses, buy a house, or live comfortably. For Caribbean immigrants like my parents, success meant providing an education for each of their children, living comfortably, and saving money in case they return to live in their native country. The latter example of success is more oriented toward living in this country for an extended period of time and doing so comfortably. As such, it is often crucial to seek financial assistance during times of crises; otherwise they risk losing everything they have worked for in this country. With the exception of the respondents who have their families here, the respondents I spoke with do not have much to lose. They migrated generally for economic purposes, and they will work until they cannot work anymore. If they return to Mexico with little money, that is more than what they came here with.

Neither version of the American Dream stated above is superior to the other. I highlighted the differences to clarify the reasons some Mexican immigrants do not seek assistance for their problems. Their notions of success and pride have implications for service providers like Juntos. Peter explained that he believes the first step in helping the Mexican community is helping them help themselves. He organizes community empowerment workshops for this purpose. Once they have developed a strong foundation, they might someday learn to openly discuss their problems with one another in a way that inspires them to help each other too.

The lives of my respondents are far from easy. The purpose of this paper was to draw attention to their individual experiences as a means of better understanding what their needs are. We have found that many migrated from Puebla because they were looking for a better economic environment. Others like Carlos migrated because they felt
oppressed by the Mexican government and by the racism that pervades there against poor, indigenous populations. Whatever their reasons for migrating, they have made it to Philadelphia, and they struggle to learn English, earn a living, and assimilate to a new, often uninviting environment. Some dream of returning home with lots of money to start a new life there, and others dream of bringing home something intangible, like the ability to use a computer or say some phrases in English.
Sources:

Interviews:

(For purposes of confidentiality and anonymity, the respondents’ names have been substituted with other names.)

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<td>10. Hugo</td>
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<td>11. Ismael</td>
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<tr>
<td>12. Peter Bloom, Founder of Juntos</td>
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Works Consulted:


